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## OTO-BIO-GRAPHIES: AUDITORY PERCEPTION IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY SELF-NARRATIVES

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I'll have said it, without a mouth I'll have said it, I'll have said it inside me, then in the same breath outside me, perhaps that's what I feel, an outside and an inside and me in the middle, perhaps that's what I am, the thing that divides the world in two, on the one side the outside, on the other the inside, that can be as thin as foil, I'm neither one side nor the other, I'm in the middle, I'm the partition, I've two surfaces and no thickness, perhaps that's what I feel, myself vibrating, I'm the tympanum, on the one hand the mind, on the other the world, I don't belong to either

Samuel Beckett

## **Table of contents**

Abstract				
IN	TROD	UCTION	5	
	From intuition to theorisation  Theoretical background and methodology			
	Organi	sation of the work	21	
1.	THINKING WITH EAR			
	1.1.	Audition in a physiological and psychological perspective	26	
	1.2.	Auditory perception and philosophy	34	
	1.2.	1 Derrida's Otobiographies	43	
	1.2.2	2 Lacoue-Labarthe's Echo of the Subject	48	
	1.2.3	3 Nancy's resonance and the diapason subject	59	
	1.3.	From Narcissus to Echo	67	
	1.3.	l Luce Irigaray	73	
	1.3.2	2 Julia Kristeva	79	
	1.3.3	3 Hélène Cixous	83	
2.	WRITING BY EAR		89	
	2.1.	From autos to oto	89	
	2.2.	Listening and self-narrative	93	
	2.3.	Self narratives in the Age of Suspicion	105	
	2.4.	Towards a phenomenology of Oto-bio-graphy	112	
3.	THE SCHOOL OF SILENCE		126	
	3.1.	Our corpus	126	
	3.1.1 Nathalie Sarraute		126	
	3.1.2 Natalia Ginzburg		130	
	3.1.3 Elias Canetti		135	
	3 2 Th	e acoustic dimension of writing	145	

3.2	2.1 Canetti's obsession with listening	145	
3.2	2.2 Sarraute's acoustic unconscious	155	
3.2	2.3 Ginzburg's acoustic realism	165	
4. TI	HE SCHOOL OF HEARING	183	
4.1.	Resonances, echoes and musical metaphores	183	
4.2.	Earliest memory	217	
4.3.	Paternal figures	256	
4.4.	Maternal figures	280	
Conclus	ions	325	
WORK	S CITED	329	
Primo	ary Sources	329	
Secondary Sources			
			On Auditory Perception
Or	n Autobiography	346	

#### **Abstract**

Throughout the twentieth century, the study of auditory perception emerged as a significant area of inquiry across various disciplines, particularly within the fields of poststructuralism and psychoanalysis. These theories converge in their understanding of hearing as a fundamental aspect of the development of the subject, leading to a decentering and reformulation of the autobiographical subject, suggesting that the rhythmic is a state of being outside of and prior to the social, verbal, thinking subject. This research aims to examine the connection between auditory perception and the formation of subjectivity in twentieth-century self-narratives. Drawing both from psychoanalysis and poststructuralism, this research proposes a reading of three autobiographical works, namely Elias Canetti's Die gerettete Zunge, Nathalie Ginzburg's Lessico famigliare and Nathalie Sarraute's *Enfance*. By highlighting the importance of the voice and of the sonorous envelope of childhood, these works artistically anticipate what would be theorised only a few decades later and create the conditions for a pre-verbal apprehension of the world, raising questions about the ineffable source of writing and the writing process itself.

#### INTRODUCTION

#### From intuition to theorisation

This thesis was written as part of the DESE (Doctorat d'Études Supérieures Européennes - Les Littératures de l'Europe Unie) doctoral program. The doctoral cycle's required theme was to investigate the relationship between literature and music by presenting a comparative work encompassing at least three different European literatures. According to the PhD outlines, the general theme can be interpreted and developed according to each doctoral student's interests and scientific and linguistic skills. The breadth of the research axes suggested by the doctoral programme has been circumscribed by individual choices responding to personal research interests. I would first like to take advantage of this introduction to contextualise the present work, to clarify its research questions, methodology and aim. On the other hand, I would like to present the work conducted through its progresses and problems, introducing the general structure of the thesis and its development. I am committed to providing a thorough exploration of the subject matter and to presenting the reader with a comprehensive understanding of the issues at hand. With this in mind, I also aim to share my cognitive journey, detailing the process that led me to the conclusions presented in this doctoral thesis. By sharing my approach and providing a transparent view of my research, I hope to engage the reader and inspire them to join me in the exploration of this topic.

This research derived its initial impetus from reading Elias Canetti's *Aufzeichnungen* and in particular one passage:

Everyone's soul is located somewhere: one has it in the lungs, another in the intestines; this one has it in the heart and that one in the sex; in my case it felt most at home in the ears<sup>1</sup>

The sentence had an unusual ring to it: how come Canetti chose an organ that appears to have nothing to do with his profession as a writer as the seat of his soul? As I delved deeper into Canetti's work, I realised that the writer's references to the acoustic sphere characterised many of his works<sup>2</sup>. It was 2019 and, before I started my PhD, I had begun to study and define my field of interest: twentieth century self-narratives. I was working on an article for a journal dedicated to the representation of everyday life in literature<sup>3</sup> and – although the main topic of my paper was not auditory perception – I realised it was a theme rooted in the narratives I had chosen to analyse and that it needed to be explored in depth.

While reading numerous twentieth century autobiographical narratives – from Ferdinand Céline to Walter Benjamin, from Jean-Paul Sartre to Annie Ernaux, from Assia Djebar to Thomas Bernhard<sup>4</sup> – I realised that some of the most popular European self-narratives of the last century

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> «Bei jedem sitzt die Seele woanders: der hat sie in den Lungen, jener im Darm; die hat sie im Herzen und jene im Geschlecht; bei mir fühlte sie sich am wohlsten in den Ohren» Elias Canetti, *Aufzeichnungen für Marie-Louise*, Fischer, Frankfurt am Main, 2009, p. 17.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> A few years later I tried to trace the origins and development of Canetti's obsession with auditory perception in an article entitled: «Malato di voci. L'archivio dei suoni di Elias Canetti», in: M. Carcione et. al. (eds.), *Lo scaffale degli scrittori: La letteratura e gli altri saperi*, Sapienza Università Editrice, Roma, 2021, pp. 33-49.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> Claudia Cerulo, «La lingua che salva: memorie dal quotidiano in Elias Canetti e Natalia Ginzburg», *SigMa – Rivista Di Letterature Comparate, Teatro E Arti Dello Spettacolo*, n. 3, 2019, pp. 147-172.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> Many of the initial impressions on this topic developed from reading the third issue of the journal *Mnemosyne o la costruzione del senso*, entitled: *L'ascoltare, il sentito dire, la phonè, in filigrana nei racconti di sé*. Through different theoretical approaches, the journal's issue investigates the auditory dimension in autobiographical texts. See: Beatrice Barbalato (ed.), *Mnemosyne o la costruzione del senso*, n. 3, Presses Universitaires de Louvain, Louvain, 2010.

shared an "acoustic atmosphere". While auditory perception was usually thematised in literary terms as listening to 'something' (listening to music, talking on the phone, etc.), I had the impression that sometimes, it touched a deeper level of the narrative, i.e., not only on a content level, but also on a structural and symbolic one.

While reading, I noticed a series of recurring elements. I had the impression that there was something that connected the acoustic sphere to childhood life, to an immersion in a pre-linguistic, familiar, and vocal environment, and that this aspect could be expressed – in some way – through writing.

Drawing the pattern I had in mind by following the constituive elements of the word "autobiography", i.e., subject (autos) lived life (bio) and life re-lived through writing (graphia), I realised I had a lead to investigate, a lead that, visually, could be traced precisely by the shape of the ear. The ear, the maze-like organ, could be seen as a metaphor for self-writing: an entirely circular and labyrinthine space where "being" is at the same time "becoming" and lived life is re-lived through writing<sup>5</sup>. This mental framework, however suggestive, required theoretical elaboration.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> This mental image, which I symbolically linked to the spiral shape of the ear, I later discovered was related to the Freudian theory of childhood memories, which Stefano Brugnolo, in an interesting article on Freudian influence in twentieth century literature, called the "contemporaneity of the past". The scholar states: «L'essenza del trauma infantile freudianamente inteso è proprio questa: l'impossibilità di trovare le parole per dire la cosa, l'impossibilità di farsene e darsene una ragione. Ora, quelle parole non dette resteranno però come un nodo in gola, come una strozzatura dell'essere. E l'unico modo per venire a capo del trauma sarà farlo partecipare al discorso, e cioè elaborarlo e condividerlo. E per Freud nessun ricordo per quanto antico non può essere fatto partecipare al discorso. Ciò è anzi proprio il compito della cura. Da questo punto di vista almeno Freud concorda con Proust: si viene a capo di questa separazione da sé prodotta dal trauma infantile, si ritorna a sé stessi, ci si ritrova solo quando e se ci si nappropria di quelle esperienze del passato che sono state dapprima vissute senza

First, it was necessary to understand what contemporary literary criticism saw as the relationship between sound and literature, what studies had been conducted on the topic and what results had been achieved. I found little theoretical information in the field of literary criticism; studies connected with auditory perception were usually devoted to individual authors<sup>6</sup>, "listening objects" or acoustic environments<sup>8</sup>. Some critics

consapevolezza, che sono state subite passivamente, Ricordandosi di quei ricordi fondamentalmente ci si ricorda di sé. Secondo questa prospettiva, il ricordo d'infanzia non appartiene perciò solo al passato ma al presente e in definitiva al futuro. Come a dire che noi ci imbattiamo continuamente nel nostro passato, che esso costituisce il nostro orizzonte mentale. Considerata in questa prospettiva la vita umana accade su due piani: procede e contemporaneamente ritorna continuamente su sé stessa, svolgendosi e riavvolgendosi» [In Freud's perspective, the essence of childhood trauma is precisely this: the impossibility of finding the words to say the thing, the impossibility of making and giving oneself a reason for it. Now, those unspoken words will remain like a knot in the throat, like a bottleneck of being. And the only way to come to terms with the trauma will be to embody it into the the discourse, that is, to process and share it. And for Freud, no memory, no matter how old, cannot be made to participate in discourse. This, indeed, is the task of the healing process. At least in this regard, Freud agrees with Proust: When and if one takes possession of those past experiences that were first lived without awareness, that were passively endured, remembering those memories fundamentally reminds one of oneself, one returns to oneself, one finds oneself again. According to this viewpoint, childhood memories belong not only to the past, but also to the present and, ultimately, to the future. As if to say that we are constantly confronted by our past, that it is our mental horizon. From this point of view, human life occurs on two levels: it progresses while also returning to itself, unwinding and rewinding.] Stefano Brugnolo, «Alcuni influssi freudiani sul tema letterario del ricordo infantile», in: Id., (ed.) Il ricordo d'infanzia nelle letterature del Novecento, Pacini, Pisa, 2012, p. 359.

<sup>6</sup> There are some interesting case studies devoted to XXth century authors. Acoustic memory has been studied at length in the works of Samuel Beckett (See: Lucia Esposito, «Mnemosyne Goes Electric: Samuel Beckett and the Soundscapes of Memory», *Textus: English Studies in Italy* 22, 2009, pp. 379-93), above all in his plays (See: Marjorie Perloff, «The silence that is not silence: Acoustic art in Samuel Beckett's Embers», in: Lois Oppenheim (ed.) *Samuel Beckett and the Arts. Music, Visual Arts and Non-Print Media*, Routledge, London and New York, 2021, pp. 247-268). Un altro autore che ha richiamato una certa attenzione critica da questo punto di vista è Walter Benjamin (See: Robert Ryder, *The Acoustic* 

examined musicality in poetry or novels<sup>9</sup>. There were few, if any, references to auditory perception in the vast twentieth century autobiography literary criticism. Many studies on sensory memory have been conducted on Proust over the years, but even in this case, auditory memory came in second to the more celebrated gustatory memory<sup>10</sup>. The link between auditory perception, memory, and self-narrative seemed not to have been particularly explored by critics.

Very early on, I realised that investigating auditory perception means mainly investigating the relationship between the subject and reality. Several disciplines intertwine on this issue, including philosophy, psychoanalysis, literary and feminist criticism. For this reason, I decided to investigate the question first from a philosophical point of view, trying to find out whether auditory perception had been explored by philosophy and in which approaches.

An important turning point in my research came when I discovered Derrida's definition of "Otobiography". Derrida's definition – on which I will dwell in detail in the first chapter – was fundamental in defining the

unconscious. From Walter Benjamin to Alexander Kluge, De Gruyter, Berlin, 2022; Ilit Ferber, «Walter Benjamin and the Acoustics of Childhood», Angelaki. Journal of the Theoretical Humanities, vol. 27, n. 5, 2022, pp. 37-55).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> On this topic see: Eric Prieto, *Listening in. Music, Mind and the Modernist Narrative*. Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press 2002.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> See: Anna Snaith, *Sound and Literature*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2020; Tamara L. Mitchell «Listening in/to Literature», *Latin American Research Review*, vol. 58, n. 1, 2022, pp. 1-11; Seán Street (ed.), *The Memory of Sound. Preserving the Sonic Past, Routledge*, New York, 2015; Karin Bijsterveld and José van Dijck (eds.), *Sound Souvenirs. Audio Technologies, Memory and Cultural Practices*, Amsterdam University Press, Amsterdam, 2009.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup> See: Angela Leighton, *Hearing Things. The Work of Sound in Literature*, Cambridge Massachussets, Harvard University Press, 2018; Giuseppe Episcopo, Sara Sullam (eds.), *Ascolto*, Biblion Edizioni, Milano, 2022.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup> See: Jonah Lehrer, *Proust was a neuroscientist*, Boston, Mariner Books, 2008.

theoretical framework for the research for two main reasons. On the one hand, in a single word, it united the two components I was trying to identify and wanted to analyse: auditory perception and self-narrative. On the other hand, it opened the way for a series of other poststructuralist studies dedicated to acoustic perception (above all those by Roland Barthes, Jean-Luc Nancy and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe) that enriched the theoretical framework. At that point, my intuitions had to be defined and put in order.

Exploring auditory perception conveyed through writing, is an undertaking that – as I noticed from the beginning of the research – might at first strike with a sense of oddness and unfamiliarity, given that:

The ear does not produce language: the ear is mute, it does not speak, and it has no voice. Although it occupies a fundamental position in the cycle of spoken language, the ear is basically a receptive organ, the channel and the labyrinth through which the sounds of the outside world enter and communicate within our body. Unlike voice and writing, which produce speech and texts, listening is silent and receptive<sup>11</sup>

This statement is not untrue since auditory perception seems at first not to have a role in the universe of the Gutenberg Galaxy<sup>12</sup>. As Anna Snaith notices: «sound is ineffable, disappearing as it is produced, therefore

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>11</sup> Marilia Librandi, *Writing by Ear. Clarice Lispector and the Aural Novel*, University of Toronto Press, Toronto, 2018, p. 5.

<sup>12</sup> The reference here is to Marshall McLuhan's idea of Gutenberg galaxy and the tension between literacy and orality. For further discussion on literacy and orality, see McLuhan's *The Gutenberg Galaxy. The Making of Typographic Man*, University of Toronto Press, Toronto, 1962; Walter J. Ong's *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*, Methuen Publishing, London, 1982; Jonathan Sterne's *The Audible Past. Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction*, Duke University Press, Durham, 2003 and, Id., «The Theology of Sound: A Critique of Orality», *Canadian Journal of Communication*, vol. 36, 2011, pp. 207-225.

it evades literary or written capture»<sup>13</sup>. Apparently, with the rise of print culture, what was aural and/or oral fell into silence.

Nonetheless, the reason of the secondary position of the sense of hearing in the cultural sphere is not only linked to the rise of printed word culture, but to a broader cultural tradion. As Paolo Giovanneti remarks in his recent study *The Lunatic is in my Head. L'ascolto come istanza letteraria e mediale*<sup>14</sup>, there is a deep-rooted tradition in Western culture that leads us to disregard the sound realm (voice, music, noises...) as a decisive factor both in our experience of the world, and in our aesthetic experience:

There is a contrast between the selective nature of sight, which has the ability to assert itself as the dominant sense, especially in media discussions, and the inclusive nature of hearing, which is often overlooked, despite its role in daily life. This contrast is also present in the literary field, whether it be narrative or poetic. In literature, the most neglected linguistic ability is hearing. Speaking, reading, and writing play an obvious role in our way of thinking about artistic production, mainly consisting of written words. However, the role of everything related to the sense of hearing is limited.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>13</sup> Anna Snaith, *Sound and Literature*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2020, Ebook.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>14</sup> Paolo Giovannetti, *«The Lunatic is in my Head»*. *L'ascolto come istanza letteraria e mediale*, Biblion, Milano, 2021.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>15</sup> «Il "calore" selettivo della vista, la sua capacità di imporsi come senso dominante, se non altro nei discorsi che affrontano i media, si oppone alla "freddezza" inclusiva dell'udito, che spesso è lasciato sullo sfondo, al di là tuttavia del ruolo che assume nella vita di tutti i giorni. E che assume […] nel campo letterario, sia esso narrativo o poetico. In letteratura siamo di fronte all'abilità

Giovannetti immediately touches on one of the aspects that I will later investigate. It is evident that Western culture is rooted in a profound predilection for the visual. This predilection is not limited to the literary sphere, although it undoubtedly characterizes it. It extends to culture and humanistic studies more broadly. In this regard, what Kara Keeling and Josh Kun say in the introduction to the volume *Sound Clash: Listening to American Studies* is worth reading. Retracing the last decades of studies dedicated to acoustic perception, the two editors note that:

There was a time when the study of sound as something beyond a scientifically measurable set of frequencies and vibrations was the obscure domain of a small cadre of ear-obsessed scholars who gathered quietly at conferences, squeezed papers on sound cultures into their otherwise non noisy research agendas and publishing records, rallied behind cries of "sound matters!" and "listen!," all while united by a collective sense of marginalization by the nagging dominance of the visual, that perennially repeating champ in the battle of the senses. In the west, choosing to study sound has always been choosing to take the silver. Vision has traditionally been linked to reason, knowledge, science, truth and rationality; sound is 'seen' as fleeting and ephemeral, mystical, subjective and contingent. The former gives you evidence, the latter only hearsay<sup>16</sup>

linguistica più negletta. Parlare, leggere e scrivere hanno un ruolo evidentissimo nel nostro modo di pensare la produzione artistica fatta di parole (per lo più) scritte; molto limitato, viceversa, è il ruolo di tutto ciò che è incardinato sul senso dell'udito» Paolo Giovannetti, op. cit, p. 15.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>16</sup> Kara Keeling and Josh Kun (eds.), *Sound Clash: Listening to American Studies*, The John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 2012, Ebook.

Despite these premises seeming anything but promising, the era of sound's marginality in the humanities seems to be over, as more and more scholars across a variety of disciplines are trying to defeat the «intolerable ear-fear»<sup>17</sup> and are now beginning to consider sound as the centerpiece of their research<sup>18</sup>.

There are two main reasons for this shift in interest: one the one hand, the increasing interest in the auditory field has to be connected with twenty-first century innovations in audio technology and new media practices. On the other hand, this process involves a bigger cultural shift. This trend is perhaps attributable to «an ongoing project to dismantle dominant hierarchies of knowledge production and critical thought that, since at least in the late 1960s, has been articulated powerfully by scholars working within postmodernism, cultural studies, postcolonialism, feminism,

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>17</sup> Geoffrey H. Hartman, *Saving the Text: Literature/Derrida/Philosophy*, The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1981, p. 157.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>18</sup> Since the late 1960s, but especially since the turn of the century, Sound Studies research has been a field of research crucial to the understanding of new findings concerning the sense of hearing. The field of study has received increasing attention in a variety of scholarly disciplines such as media studies, semiology, and neurosciences, resulting in what has been labelled the «acoustic turn» in cultural studies (see: Petra Maria Meyer (ed.), Acoustic Turn, Fink, München, 2008). Most of the Sound Studies research is motivated by the desire to overcome the visualist approach of modern and postmodern scholarship. There are now several anthologies concerned with the "acoustic turn", offering a fascinating overview of the various approaches to sound studies, among them Michael Bull's four-volume Sound Studies: Critical Concepts in Media and Cultural Studies, Routledge, London and New York, 2013; Jonathan Sterne's The Sound Studies Reader, Routledge, London and New York, 2012; Michael Bull and Les Back's The Auditory Culture Reader, Routledge, London and New York, 2006; and Trevor Pinch and Karin Bijsterveld's The Oxford Handbook of Sound Studies (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2012). Although this work is not solely based on the sound studies approach, I would like to promptly state that the research conducted by Sound Studies on auditory perception in recent decades has provided numerous theoretical and methodological insights into the discussion.

queer studies, critical race and ethnic studies»<sup>19</sup>. This process eventually involved the literary field.

Even though listening is regarded as a minor sense when analysed in its connection to the written word, recent studies have shown that it is possible to discover the presence of sound in literature<sup>20</sup>. Particularly interesting is a research field called "Literary Acoustics". The term was coined by Philipp Schweighauser in *The Noise of American Literature*, 1890-1985: Toward a History of Literary Acoustics (2006), referring to the relations between literary texts and the acoustics world. Although Schweighauser's perspective differs from the one I will use in this thesis – the scholar uses methodologies related to sound studies and intermediality theory – one aspect that he highlights in his investigation was helpful in defining my field of inquiry. Schweighauser believes that relationships between literature and sound should not be restricted to issues of representations, for:

As soon as we put noise into text, it is no longer noise but something more ordered and codified. Thus, any literary attempt to represent noise must grapple with its

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>19</sup> Kara Keeling and Josh Kun (eds.) *Sound Clash: Listening to American Studies*, The John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 2012.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>20</sup> According to Walter J. Ong, the basic orality of language is permanent. It thus also involves the written domain and, above all the reading practice: «reading a text means converting it to sound, aloud or in the imagination, syllable by syllable in slow reading or sketchily in the rapid reading common to high technology cultures. Writing can never dispense with orality» Walter J. Ong, op. cit., p. 7. Very interesting from this point of view is Igor Reyner's paper «Fictional narratives of listening: crossovers between literature and sound studies», in which the author demonstrates how scholars associated with what came to be called sound studies turned to literary works to tackle questions of sound and listening. See Igor Reyner, art. cit., *Interference Journal*, 2018, pp. 129-142. On this topic see also Mladen Dolar, «Is there a voice in the text?», in: Jorge Sacido-Romero and Sylvia Mieszkowski (eds.), *Sound Effects: The Object Voice in Fiction*, Brill, Leiden, 2015.

unrepresentability. As students of literature know, one way of representing the unrepresentable – be it noise, death, or genocide – is to invent special language uses. [...] And such inventions of a specifically literary language that differs radically from established ways of communicating are precisely the precondition for literature to assume its systemic force as the noise of culture<sup>21</sup>

The main challenge of this work was to put into words a fundamentally unrepresentable aspect of human perception (the sense of hearing) and analyse it in an essentially mute form of human expression (literature). This process, carried out with what Kristeva calls «the desire for language»<sup>22</sup>, was conducted is an attempt to look back, to analyse rather well-known texts, but from a new and unfamiliar perspective.

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>21</sup> Philipp Schweighauser *The Noise of American Literature, 1890-1985: Toward a History of Literary Acoustics*, University of Florida Press, Gainesville, 2006, p. 476.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>22</sup> As I will have the opportunity tho explain in the following chapters, this thesis is not only an investigation about literature, but also an attempt to investgate the way in which we perceive ourselves as subjects. On the expression "desire for language", I share Julia Kristeva's definition. She states: «considering the complexity of the signifying process, no belief in an all-powerful theory is tenable; there remains the necessity to pay attention to the ability to deal with the desire for language, and by this I mean paying attention to art and literature, and, in even more poignant fashion, to the art and literature of our time, which remain alone, in our world of technological rationality, to impel us not toward the absolute but toward a quest for a little more truth, an impossible truth, concerning the meaning of speech, concerning our condition as speaking [and, I would add, listening] beings. [...] What was necessary was undoubtely a desire for language (is this another way of saying, "sublimation"?), a passion for ventures with meaning and its materials (ranging from colors to sounds, beginning with phonemes, syllables, words), in order to carry a theoretical experience to that point where apparent abstraction is revealed as the apex of archaic, oneiric, nocturnal, or corporeal concreteness, to that point where meaning has not yet appeared (the child), no longer is (the insane person), or else functions as a restructuring (writing, art)»

This research belongs to the broad field comparative literature as well as that of Sound Studies. More specifically, it is located in the cultural half of this field, in the corner where a key interest in sound, voice and vocality intersects with literary criticism on the one side, and psychoanalytic theory, on the other.

The aim of this research was ultimately twofold: On the one hand, I wanted to put some order and advance some theories in a grey area of knowledge (where sound and literature intertwine) and on the other hand, I wanted to try to put in dialogue philosophical and psychanalytical theories with literary texts. While this text may not provide definitive answers to every question or resolve all uncertainties, it aims to stimulate thought and prompt further inquiry. As philosopher Gemma Corradi-Fiumara states:

This is a tentative pursuit which keeps us linked with the complexity of humans; an effort to retreive subordinate, minor dimensions and to explore those areas which provoke indifference or even repugnance in the clear logic of 'normal', established thinking. A wider circulation of meanings which may safeguard the lesser elements can only enhance our respect for the inexhaustible complexity of rationality<sup>23</sup>

Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language. A semiotic approach to Literature and Art*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1980, p. x.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>23</sup> Gemma Corradi-Fiumara, *The Other Side of Language. A philosophy of Listening*, Routledge, London and New York, 1990, pp. 3-4.

### Theoretical background and methodology

In considering the sense of hearing, Heidegger says: «There is probably only a few things to be said about hearing in its true sense that certainly concern every individual directly. It is not a matter of research here, but of carefully considering something simple»<sup>24</sup>. Heidegger's remark highlights the dual nature of hearing. On the one hand, it is a fundamental aspect of human perception that has a direct impact on every individual. On the other hand, its intangible and ephemeral nature makes it difficult to articulate in words, as sound disappears as it is produced. Hence, it is challenging to describe or capture in writing.

As I started my research, the concept of "hearing/listening"<sup>25</sup> became increasingly flexible and commodious; capable of subsuming not only literary representation of auditory perception – i.e., the «non-discursive

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>24</sup> «[Es] läßt sich über das eigentliche Hören vielleicht nur Weniges sagen, das freilich jeden Menschen unmittelbar angeht. Hier gilt es nicht zu forschen, sondern nachdenkend auf Einfaches zu achten» Martin Heidegger, *Vorträge und Aufsätze*, Klostermann, Frankfurt am Main, 2000, p. 220.

<sup>25</sup> Hearing can be defined as the process of perceiving sounds. Listening, on the other hand means to pay attention to sound. It will be helpful to clarify at the outset that the distinction between "hearing" and "listening" has also been the subject of philosophical debate. Roland Barthes makes a distinction between hearing and listening and states: «Hearing is a physiological phenomenon; listening is a psychological act» (Roland Barthes, «Listening», in: *The Representability of Forms. Critical Essays on Music, Art and Representation*, University of California Press, Berkley and Los Angeles, 1991, pp. 245-260, p. 245). Jean-Luc Nancy makes the argument even more detailed by differentiating between the three French verbes (écouter/ouïr/entendre), where the French verb "entendre" carries the double meaning of "to listen" and "to understand" (Jean-Luc Nancy, *Listening*, Fordham University Press, New York, 2007). Following the lead provided by the two philosophers, in the following paragraphs I will mostly use the terms "auditory perception" and "acoustic perception", referring to the sense of hearing as an element of philosophical enquiry.

sonority of the printed word» $^{26}$  – but the whole problematic of self and authorship.

The first step in starting the research was locating auditory perception as a research object, understanding what has been said about it, and summarising its features without becoming trapped by one theory or another. This debut proved to be anything but simple, as auditory perception has proven to be an object of study within fields as diverse as media studies, psychoanalysis, cultural studies, musicology, neuroscience, philosophy, and sociology.

As I shall discuss in the first chapter, a great number of theories about auditory perception have been characterised by the same degree of uncertainty and unreliability throughout the centuries. As a result of being part of a regime of perpetual deniability, they have a weak epistemological status. Although it is undeniably this character of instability and logical indecision that has allowed a prodigious number of different contributions, ideas, and theories to emerge, both on the sense of hearing and its role within the cultural and artistic systems.

I did not hesitate to refer the analysis of the chosen texts to the epistemological postulations of previous researchers (both from a literary and a philosophical point of view) for the investigation to have meaning and heuristic value; however, it is important to emphasize the need to work towards a modernisation and a new agreement, both syncretic and eclectic, of the different readings and interpretations. While developing my research, I became increasingly convinced that the study of auditory perception cannot be limited to a single psychological, philosophical, or literary approach; rather, it is essential to explore cross-disciplinary perspectives and engage them in dialogue with each other.

<sup>26</sup> Robert Ryder, *The Acoustic unconscious*, op. cit., p. 243.

It was crucial, to sketch out my own path of analysis, to take advantage of these rich and diverse studies, to bring them together and put them into context, in order to propose a reading that was both coherent and synthetic. Firstly, because these studies – often rich and specialized – have assisted me in better defining the problem, and even framing acoustic perception within a dynamic and dialectical framework. Secondly, because these studies helped me define – starting from a non-literary perspective – my (literary) research questions.

OTO-BIO-GRAPHIES, the title I have chosen for the thesis reflects the dual nature of this dissertation, which is both an empirical-literary investigation and a theoretical-philosophical work. From a literary point of view, I decided to divide the title into a triple conceptual dimension as theorised by Georges Gusdorf. According to Gusdorf the simplest definition of autobiography is the one contained in the word itself: a person speaks about themselves (autos); this same person tells their life story (bio) through writing (graphia). The three parts of the word correspond exactly to the problems posed by the autobiographical genre and to all the criticisms that have accompanied its development over time. The title of the thesis also takes up a concept developed by Jacques Derrida. The philosopher replaces the 'autos' of the autobiography with an 'o' underlining the prefix 'oto' which indicates the ear, i.e., auditory perception. As I will demonstrate in the first chapter, my reflections move within a post-structuralist research horizon that, in the wake of Derridean deconstruction, proposes a conceptualization of the subject no longer anchored to the Western "oculocentric" tradition.

My initial reflection is developed by considering the importance of the sense of hearing in the formation of the subject. To conduct this type of discussion, I draw mainly on object-relation theory, a school of thought in psychoanalytic theory centered around theories of stages of ego development, which «describes the preoedipal period as an interpersonal field of relationships internalized by the infant and thus constitutive of the self»<sup>27</sup>. While not adopting any singular psychoanalytic or philosophical discourse, I draw loosely on several sources, including, Freud, Lacan, Lacoue-Labarthe, Nancy and Barthes. In addition to the above, I also situate my readings alongside the rich body of literature generated by feminism's appropriation of the relational self and the maternal, namely in the practice of sexual difference (as influenced by Kristeva, Cixous and Irigaray), in the fields of philosophy (above all Cavarero), psychoanalysis (Chodorow) and literature.

The purpose of this complex interdisciplinary theoretical background is to eventually apply such theories to literary autobiography. As psychoanalysis reads the narratives of its subjects, soliciting meaning, it pays attention both to what is said and what is left unsaid, the articulated and unarticulated. Literary criticism, at times, does the same. Nancy Chodorow, the well-known earlier theorist of the pre-oedipal<sup>28</sup>, cites psychoanalysis as «the method and theory directed toward the investigation and understanding of how we develop and experience [...] unconscious fantasies and of how we construct and reconstruct our felt past in the present»<sup>29</sup>. While I would not go so far as to call it a "method" or a "theory", it is certainly acceptable to admit that autobiographical writing is also an attempt to construct and re-construct our felt past in the present. Moreover, considering that «the [family] system perpetuates itself over generations. One tool for the investigation of repetitious family dynamics is

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>27</sup> Shirley Nelson Garner (et. al), *The (M)other tongue: essays in feminist psychoanalytic interpretation*, Cornell University Press, New York, 1985, p. 19.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>28</sup> See: Nancy Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering, Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender*, University of California Press, Berkley, 1978, pp. 111-129.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>29</sup> Nancy Chodorow, *Feminism and Psychoanalitic Theory*, Yale University Press, London and New Haven, 1989, p. 4.

the autobiography»<sup>30</sup>. Always bearing in mind the degree of fiction embedded in any self-representation<sup>31</sup>, autobiographical narratives provide a unique lens through which to view the diverse and, at times, conflictual representation of subject-self constitution as such.

#### **Organisation of the work**

The research is divided into two sections, each consisting of two chapters. I see the four chapters not necessarily as a succession, but as itineraries, i. e., four different ways of approaching the same subject.

The first half of the thesis is concerned with the theoretical-methodological aspects underpinning my discussion. In chapter one, entitled "Thinking with ear", the focus is not on the ear as an object, but on the ear as a form of embodied knowledge, as something subjects *think with*. I consider auditory perception from both a psychoanalytical and philosophical standpoint. Through some psychanalytical theories (Sigmund Freud, Guy Rosolato, Didier Anzieu) I introduce the concept of "acoustic mirror", i.e., a

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>30</sup> Wendy Deutelbaum and Cynthia Huff, «Class, Gender and Family System: The Case of George Sand», in: *The (M)other tongue*, op. cit., p. 265.

assumptions about the authors' psyche nor to discuss the degree of truthfulness or fictionality of the works. My analysis will be conducted mainly on the narrative voice and on the author's choice of representation of their narrative voices. I do share here Naomi Segal's point of view on this topic. The scholar states: «It is a long time since literary criticism used psychoanalysis in a biographical bid to expose the unconscious of the author; if instead it has intended to psychoanalyze the text as the symptomatic utterance of the narrator, this is not because the ontological status of the latter is any more "real," but because any piece of language functions as evidence. [...] The narrative is a motivated fantasy, but whose fantasy is a question we may and perhaps must leave undetermined» Naomi Segal, «Echo and Narcissus», in: Teresa Brennan (ed.), *Between Feminism and Psychanalysis*, Routledge, London and New York, 1989, p. 168.

pre-symbolic stage in subject's development based on acoustic exchange. What emerges is the critical importance of hearing in the subject's development. The auditory perception and the mnestic remains of it influence the first years of life, which is mainly shaped in the relationship with the Other.

After investigating the major psychoanalytic theories that have converged in defining the main features of hearing, my investigation shifts to the philosophical realm. The main purpose of the section concerning philosophy is to understand why the sense of hearing appears to challenge the Western philosophical tradition, which is based primarily on a visualist framework. This path of investigation leads to consider the hegemony of the eye to be parallel with the development of Western ego-consciousness. Drawing mainly on poststructuralist philosophy, I investigate the connection between auditory perception and the overcoming of the traditional metaphysical definition of "self". While, according to the oculocentric tradition, reason implies the separation of subject and object, the acoustic realm involves their union. In acoustic perception, there is no boundary between perceiver and perceived.

In this section I propose the analysis of three essays (Derrida's Otobiographies, Lacoue-Labarthe's Echo of the Subject and Nancy's Listening), introducing the connection between the sense of hearing and self-narrative. Through a shift from autos to oto, the three essays overcome the limitations of the split specular subject by re-imagining a theory of subject-formation in terms borrowed from the acoustic domain, with rhythm playing a central role. These theories lead to a decentering and reformulation of the autobiographical subject, suggesting that the rhythmic is a state of being outside of and prior to the social, verbal, thinking subject. In the last section of the first chapter, focusing on Kristeva's theorisation of the chora as a primary sphere of experience linked to the acoustic relationship with the mother, I go through the concept of "pre-symbolic" unity as developed by Kristeva, Cixous and Irigaray. This final section also

shifts the inquiry from a theoretical/philosophical point of view to a literary one.

In Chapter two, "Writing by Ear" I investigate whether literature addressed the acoustic dimension of experience and, if so, how. I address the issue in three main stages: First, I retrace some key moments in autobiographical writing to determine whether and how a relationship between auditory perception and self-narrative can be discussed. My argument is that the autobiographical genre takes the form of listening to a voice within oneself. Writing, in this sense, is a response to that voice, to the Derridean "other". Second, drawing mainly on Lyotard's concept of enface (childhood is not only and not so much a stage of life as it is a mental dimension, that of inexperience) and on Prado Jr's reading of Proust, I argue that the autobiographical is often connected with the desire of capturing an affective tone that lies in the sonority of words (Kristeva's pre-symbolic chora). The autobiographical act would then stay secretly tuned in unison with this first, archaic voice, another voice than the subject's, foreign although part of the subject, which would complicate and confuse the identity of a non-static, non-homogeneous self. Lastly, I focus on the literary period in consideration. In this section, I argue that thanks to the discoveries of psychoanalysis, autobiographical writing in the second half of the twentieth century become a means to question the existence of a selffounded subject and to investigate the functioning of memory. This cultural shift leads to what Viart and Vercier defined "variations sur l'autobiographie". Taking the innovative elements of the autobiographical genre of the second half of the twentieth century identified by Viart and Vercier and cross-referencing them with psychoanalytic and philosophical theories relating to the sense of hearing, I close chapter two by presenting a "phenomenology of oto-bio-graphy".

The third and fourth chapters are devoted to the work of Elias Canetti, Natalia Ginzburg, and Natalie Sarraute. The choice fell on these three authors because, despite their very different literary production, all showed if not an explicit interest, at least an implicit propensity to the acoustic dimension of experience. The aim of the two chapters is to investigate how, in the poetics of the three authors, acoustic perception is not relegated to the role of an episode, an accessory or a decorative element, but rather interacts – directly or indirectly – with all levels of discourse, from the stylistic to the metaphorical one.

The two chapters are named after the definition Elias Canetti gave to two moments in his life: "the school of silence" refers to his adult life as a writer, while "the school of hearing" refers to his childhood and adolescent years. The expression "school of hearing" was also chosen as a counterpoint to the famous *école du regard*, a definition given to the *Nouveau Roman* movement and attributed to Nathalie Sarraute, who, however, did not recognise herself in the definition<sup>32</sup>.

In chapter three, I briefly present some biographical data on the three authors, contextualising their work in the historical period of interest. I then focus on the implicit or direct influence that auditory perception had on their writing. Drawing from the three authors' legacy of notes, essays, and interviews I investigate their interest in the acoustic, an interest that, in my reading implicitly suggests the fundamental intersubjective reality of subjectivity itself. On the same note, for the three authors, the sense of hearing seems to be a model for encountering what is seemingly unintelligible, including what is hidden within what is most familiar, namely: language.

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>32</sup> As Sarraute stated: «Chez moi, tout était compose de mouvements intérieurs, et eux s'attachaient surtout aux descriptions. On a même par les appeler "L'École du regard" – don't je ne pouvais pas faire partie, évidemment» [For me it was all about inner movements, and they were mostly about descriptions. They were even called "L'École du regard" – which I couldn't be a part of, of course] «Propos sur la technique du roman», Nathalie Sarraute interviewed by Alison Finch and David Kelley, *French Studies*, n. 39, 1985, p. 305.

The fourth and last chapter is devoted to the close reading of Die gerettete Zunge, Lessico famigliare and Enfance. It is my argument that by highlighting the importance of the voice and of the sonorous envelope of childhood the three autobiographical narratives question the (ineffable) source of writing and the writing process itself. The three texts create the conditions for an apprehension of the world that is pre-verbal, where the conditions of the auditory prevail, where the self engages with the environment through sound, before understanding. The human voice is primary among the sounds in this environment and contact with the voice (and voiced words) is material, visceral and corporeal. The voice and the acoustic perception can therefore trigger pre-verbal memory. The close reading follows the list of features I set in the "phenomenology of oto-biography" and is based on a few but central scenes (above all, I highlight the importance of the first memory and the relationship with parental figures from both a thematic and narratological point of view) and on an analysis of the narratives' structure. In the conclusions, I offer a final thought on the subtle relationship between that sense of unity that narration confers to identity, and the pre-oedipal, presymbolic wholeness.

To enhance the accessibility of this work, it has been my preference to incorporate English citations within the body of the text while retaining the original sources in the footnotes. It is to be noted that, unless otherwise indicated, the English translations presented herein are the author's own.

#### 1. THINKING WITH EAR

# 1.1. Audition in a physiological and psychological perspective

In a physiological point of view, hearing is the specific sensory function related to the perception of sound waves that involves the ear as the organ for receiving stimuli. Sound, on the other hand, is an acoustic sensation with clearly identifiable pitch, intensity, and timbre characteristics that are determined by sound waves emitted by a source and propagating in the air or any elastic medium until they reach the ear and are transmitted to the eardrum. Hearing is a primordial faculty; it is the first sense to develop in the human foetus<sup>33</sup> and, as anthropologist Christoph Wulf points out, plays an important role not only in the construction of sociality, but also in the construction of subjectivity:

The sense of hearing develops long before the sense of sight and other senses begin to function. We are called upon by it before we are born. We hear others before seeing them, smelling them, or touching them. With hearing, we hear speech before speaking and understanding it. Hearing is therefore a condition for understanding and speaking. [...] The sense of

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>33</sup> Gian Carlo Di Renzo and Manuela Marchi (eds.), *Udite! Udite! Gli inganni dell'Ascolto, Dal Rumore Al Suono,* Franco Angeli, Milano, 2020, p.15.

hearing is the social sense. No social community is formed without its members learning to listen to each other.<sup>34</sup>

Physiology has shown that there are not only biological but also sensory and emotional exchanges between the mother and the foetus, the stages of auditory pathway maturation occur over a complex continuum of developmental phenomena that begin in the prenatal period.

According to otorhinolaryngologist Alfred Tomatis<sup>35</sup>, the ear is a psychosomatic connecting unit with three main functions: energetic (stimulates the cerebral cortex), auditory (collects and decodes sensory stimuli), and balance (regulates the body's statics and kinetics). The complex function of listening emerges gradually from the integration of these three functions and implies the intention to welcome the surrounding world by developing the faculties that allow the entire body to resonate with the sound world in which it is immersed. It is precisely the receptive aspect of listening that allows us to understand and respond to what the other person is saying, not just in terms of words, but also in terms of the meaning that the sound itself conveys through its frequencies<sup>36</sup>. In fact, if we consider auditory perception in the dual register of sound as received and/or produced by a subject, it is crucial to acknowledge that the body, and in particular, the "psychic envelope" is the core of the acoustic experience. The

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>34</sup> «Le sens de l'ouïe se développe bien longtemps avant que le sens de la vue et les autres sens commencent de fonctionner. Nous sommes interpellés par lui avant notre naissance. Nous entendons les autres avant de les voir, les sentir et les toucher. Avec lui, nous entendons la parole avant de parler et de comprendre. Entendre est ainsi la condition pour comprendre et parler. [...] Le sens de l'ouïe est le sens social. Aucune communauté sociale ne se forme sans que ses membres apprennent à s'écouter» Christoph Wulf, «L'Ouïe», *Ghrebh-. Revista de Comunicação, Cultura e Teoria da Mídia*, 2007, pp. 68-78, p. 70.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>35</sup> See: Alfred Tomatis, *De la communication intra-utérine au langage humain: la liberation d'Œdipe*, Esf, Paris, 1991.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>36</sup> See: Di Renzo and Marchi, op. cit., p. 15.

term "psychic envelope" refers to a protective surface for excitations that can influence the psyche. This filter function is traditionally attributed to the "ego" (the self) in Freudian theory of psyche<sup>37</sup>. Freud defines the "ego" as a psychological instance that act as an interface between the subject's inside and outside worlds. In his graphic explanation of the theory, a surprising detail is the place given to the auditory perception:

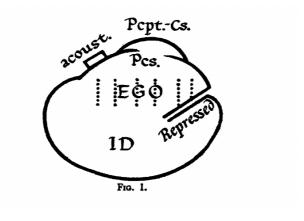


Figure 1 Sigmund Freud, The Ego and the Id, p. 18.

Psychologist Gilles Bourlot observed a few interesting consequences when analysing Freud's scheme based on the importance given to acoustic perception:

Freud emphasizes the fundamental role of acoustic perceptions in the formation of the psyche. By reflecting on the history of the "ego" and on the dialectic of inside/outside, Freud sought to consider the relationships between sensory perception, memory, and the destiny of the psyche. In this framework, the formation of the ego (as well as that of the superego) appears to be fundamentally linked to the mnemonic residues of voices,

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>37</sup> See: Sigmund Freud, *The Ego and The Id.*, Norton & Company, New York, 1960, p. 18.

speeches, and words that have been heard, hence the prominent place given to signifiers in the unconscious memory. The human subject is formed to a significant extent by a sonic heritage composed of these voices, words, intonations, and enunciations... in other words, they come into being through their faculty of hearing, introjecting, and memorizing discourses, and through their tendency to take up and repeat, consciously and unconsciously, this heritage<sup>38</sup>

According to Freud, the formation of the ego is therefore linked not only to the sounds we hear when we listen to them, but also to their mnestic trace, which lingers in our psyche for a long time and contributes to our formation as subjects. Sounds and their mnestic traces are central also in Guy Rosolato's argument. The psychanalyst considers heard sounds and heard voice in particular as a physical map or register of psychic and physiological traces of one's individual past, bearing the marks of «infraliminal sounds» (i.e., sounds below the threshold of consciousness), of an «infrasonorousness»<sup>39</sup> strictly connected to childhood experiences. Rosolato notes that the infant's experience of its voice provides it with its

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>38</sup> «Freud insiste sur le caractère fondamental des perceptions acoustiques dans la formation du psychisme. En s'interrogeant sur l'histoire du « moi » et sur la dialectique dedans/dehors, il s'agissait pour Freud de penser les rapports entre la perception sensible, la mémoire et le destin du psychisme. Dans ce schéma, la formation du moi (ainsi que celle du surmoi) apparaît comme fondamentalement reliée aux restes mnésiques des voix, des discours et des mots *entendus*, d'où la place de premier plan accordée aux signifiants dans la mémoire inconsciente. Le sujet humain se forme pour une parte essentielle dans un héritage sonore fait de ces voix, mots, intonations et énonciations... autant dire qu'il advient de par sa faculté d'entendre, d'introjecter, de mémoriser des discours et de par sa tendance à reprendre et répéter, consciemment et inconsciemment, cet héritage» Gilles Bourlot, «Quand le bruit prend corps : une experience subjective entre chaos mythique et elaboration symbolique», *ethnographiques.org* [online], 2009, p. 8.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>39</sup> Guy Rosolato, «La voix entre corps et langage», *Revue française de psychanalise*, 1974 [online], p. 77.

first sense of spatial relations of the relationship between inside and out, of entry and exit, since the voice is simultaneously spoken and heard by the speaker.

A similar theory was proposed by the French psychoanalyst Didier Anzieu in his ground-breaking study on pre-verbal development entitled *Le Moi-Peu* (1985) in this work, he describes the formation of a primitive psyche or pre-ego, which originates in bodily sensation.

According to Anzieu, the very possibility of constructing a coherent "self" presupposes a distinction between an "interior" – a sort of container of psychological experiences – and an "exterior" constituted by a multiplicity of beings and objects. Anzieu's approach emphasises the function of the skin as a fundamental membrane in that it allows the elaboration of the boundaries between inside and outside. Touch is the first sense to develop embryonically and thus, according to Anzieu, the skin is the basic reference point for all the various sense data. Anzieu theorises three different skin's functions: the first one is the so called "rétention" whose function is to allow the subject to retain sensations inside themselves. The second one is the "délimitation", which enables the differentiation between inside and outside. The third one is the "échange", the function which controls sensory interactions. According to Bourlot:

The construction of the psychic life would thus occur within a dual challenge, which consists of being able to establish boundaries between oneself and the world and to regulate exchanges with external objects. We find these three levels of articulation between the external world and internal experience in the problem of noise: concerning retention, we will see to what extent the subject constitutes himself as a speaker through his ability to retain and repeat the sounds heard. The ability to speak a language fundamentally requires a memory of the phonemes that make up its structure. Regarding delimitation, we

have emphasized that unlike the mouth or the eye, the ear cannot close itself off: it is inherently open to the outside, hence the particular status of auditory sensations. The closure of the body on itself is immediately called into question by the anatomy of hearing. By taking up Freud's formula according to which "anatomy is destiny," it is possible to suggest that it is the singular anatomy of the ear that implies the problem of the sonorous in general and of noise in particular as what can penetrate the psyche and the body with the least difficulty<sup>40</sup>

The skin ego, then, consists of a number of protective 'psychic envelopes', psychic representations based primarily on tactile and auditory experience. Anzieu deals extensively with the acoustic sphere in *Le Moi-Peau*, stating: «The sound space is the first psychical space»<sup>41</sup>. Anzieu defines «bain sonore» (sound bath) the sonic background in which the baby is immersed even before birth. He states that sounds are present at the start of all psychic life in the sense that the infant is initially unable to decipher

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>40</sup> «La vie psychique se construirait ainsi dans un double enjeu qui consiste à pouvoir établir des limites entre soi et le monde et à réguler les échanges avec les objets extérieurs. Nous retrouvons ces trois niveaux d'articulation entre le monde externe et le vécu interne dans la problématique du bruit : concernant la rétention, nous allons voir à quel point le sujet se constitue comme parlant par sa capacité à retenir et répéter les sons entendus. La capacité de parler une langue suppose fondamentalement une mémoire des phonèmes qui en constituent la trame. Sur le plan de la délimitation, nous avons souligné que l'oreille n'a pas, contrairement à la bouche ou à l'œil, la possibilité de se fermer : elle est par essence ouverte sur le dehors, d'où le statut particulier des sensations auditives. La clôture du corps sur lui-même est d'emblée mise en question de par l'anatomie de l'audition. En reprenant la formule de Freud selon laquelle « l'anatomie est le destin », il serait possible de suggérer que c'est l'anatomie singulière de l'oreille qui implique la problématique du sonore en général et du bruit en particulier comme ce qui peut pénétrer avec le moins de difficulté le psychisme et le corps» Gilles Bourlot, art. cit., p. 15.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>41</sup> Didier Anzieu, *The Skin-Ego*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1989, p. 170.

and think about what they hear from themselves and what they perceive from their surroundings. In this psychic stage, the subject has no sense of interiority or exteriority because there are no boundaries between inside and outside. These primitive encounters with the outside world, occurring along the axis of the mother's voice<sup>42</sup>, lay the groundwork for what will later function as "identity". Since the child could hear their mother's voice, intonations, and the rhythm of her words long before being born, their relationship with the surroundings is organised around auditory incorporation. The child may first "recognise" themselves in their mother's vocal "mirror". Developing his theory, Anzieu reflects on Lacan's theories about the mirror-stage of the child's development in the chapter entitled "The wrapping of sound"<sup>43</sup>.

Before delving into Anzieu's auditory reinterpretation, it is worthwhile to briefly revisit Lacan's concept of the mirror stage. According to Lacan, there is a moment in a child's development where they cannot differentiate themselves from others, a state of unity that he terms "the Real." During this phase, the child lacks language and exists in symbiotic unity with their environment. The child becomes aware of themselves through a process of misrecognition called the "mirror stage." In this stage, the child sees their reflection in a mirror and misidentifies it as their own self. Lacan terms this stage "The Imaginary" and it is a moment of both identification and alienation since the child loses unity by recognizing themselves through an external object. As a result, the child's subjectivity is formed through a sense of "otherness" by looking at their reflection. According to Lacan, this process of ego identification in the mirror stage

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>42</sup> Drawing from Anzieu's theory, I will further investigate the role of the mother's voice in the construction of the self from a philosophical and cultural point of view in the paragraph entitled "From Narcissus to Echo".

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>43</sup> Didier Anzieu, op. cit., pp. 183-196.

creates a non-self-identical self in a gaze that represents the "self" as an imaginary other<sup>44</sup>.

Anzieu proposes, instead, an auditory stage of self-reflection prior to Lacan's "mirror-stage" self-consciousness, drawing attention «to the still earlier existence of a mirror of sound or an auditory-phonic skin, and its role in the psyche's acquisition of the ability to signify and later to symbolise»<sup>45</sup>. Anzieu's mirror of sound is a peculiar "mirror" in the sense that it introduces dissimilarity: the mother who speaks to the child brings a qualitative difference by her responses: she expresses herself in a verbal configuration that the baby is not yet capable of<sup>46</sup>. The already mentioned "sound bath" is thus a crucial mediator between the child, its body, and its mother; it is a nodal vector of the first exchanges between the *infans* – in Latin etymology "the speechless, i.e., the one who does not speak" – and the sound environment<sup>47</sup>.

It is worth briefly summarising some of the main concepts presented in the paragraph to keep them in mind when we address the same topic – the importance of listening in the formation of the *infans* – from a philosophical and a literary point of view. What emerges is the critical importance of auditory perception for the subject in formation. The subject is formed by what Anzieu refers to as a "sound bath". The acoustic perception – and the mnestic remains of it – influences the formation of the subject, which is mainly shaped in the relationship with the Other.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>44</sup> See: Jacques Lacan, *Ecrits: A selection*, Norton, New York, 1977, pp. 1-7. For an interesting comparison between Lacan's "mirror stage" and the "acoustic mirror", see: Kaja Silvermann, *The Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalisis and Cinema*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1988, pp. 7-8.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>45</sup> Didier Anzieu, op. cit., p. 174.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>47</sup> Ibid.

### 1.2. Auditory perception and philosophy

As well covered by Adriana Cavarero in her book *For More Than One Voice: Toward a Philosophy of Vocal Expression*, the sense of hearing, when studied in a philosophical point of view, challenges the Western philosophical tradition, a tradition in which the ear is traditionally subverted to the eye and sound is subservient to rationality and argument.

In the introduction to his book *Listening and Voice* (1976), philosopher Don Ihde suggests that what is called for is an ontology of the auditory as a way of «moving from the present with all its taken-for-granted beliefs about vision and experience [...] towards a radically different understanding of experience, one which has its roots in a phenomenology of auditory experience»<sup>48</sup>, he sceptically states: «what is needed is a philosophy of listening [...] But is this a possibility?»<sup>49</sup>. This question implies that it is impossible for a philosophy solely based on visual paradigms to fully grasp aural perception: «philosophy has its very roots intertwined with a secret vision of Being that has resulted in the present state of visualism»<sup>50</sup>. Even in the second edition of his work, Ihde admits another unanswered «call for a full phenomenology of sound»<sup>51</sup>.

After Don Ihde, Italian philosopher Gemma Corradi-Fiumara attempted to establish a set of features to describe a philosophy of listening. In her book *Filosofia dell'ascolto* (1985), which was translated into English as *The Other side of Language: Philosophy of Listening* (1995), she attempts to overcome what she defines a "blind spot" in philosophy, namely

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>48</sup> Don Ihde *Listening and Voice. Phenomenologies of Sound*, State University of New York Press, Albany, 2007, p. 15.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>51</sup> Ibid., p. 215.

the study of aural perception. Despite the scholar's attempt to answer the question «as to why the vast body of philosophical literature tends to neglect the problem of listening»<sup>52</sup>, her research concludes – as Don Ihde's had – «with a similar sense of unfinished business»<sup>53</sup>.

According to Cavarero, the tendency to prioritise visual perception over auditory perception «is a symptom of a problem that has to do with the philosophical affinity for an abstract and bodiless universality, and for the domain of a word that does not come out of any throat of flesh»<sup>54</sup>. Basically, she demonstrates that the philosophical oculocentrism is strictly connected with the Western tradition of logocentrism<sup>55</sup>. According to Cavarero, "logos" is the most ambiguous philosophical term: «Often a synonym for what we call "language," the term oscillates between "discourse" and "reason," between the realm of speech and the realm of thought. It comprehends and confuses them both»<sup>56</sup>. Philosophical logocentrism, she states, has always been concerned with the link between words and the organisation of speech, to the detriment of the acoustic level of speech<sup>57</sup>.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>52</sup> Gemma Corradi-Fiumara, *The Other side of Language: Philosophy of Listening*, Routledge, London, p. 29.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>53</sup> Angela Leighton *Hearing Things. The Work of Sound in Literature*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge Massachussets, 2018, Ebook. Similar questions animate the cultural discourse at the beginning of XXI<sup>th</sup> century, i.e., in Bruce Smith (1999) *The Acoustic World of Early modern England* (cfr. pp. 6-8), and in Salomé Voegelin *Listening to Noise and Silence: Towards a Philosophy of Sound art* (2010) which returns to the problem of how listening might be worthy of philosophical investigation.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>54</sup> Adriana Cavarero, For More than One Voice. Toward a Philosophy of Vocal Expression, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2005, p. 8.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>55</sup> See: Ibid., pp. 33-42.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>56</sup> Ibid., p. 33.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>57</sup> On this topic, Mladen Dolar, in his history of the voice, traces the origin of the suspicion of voice in Western culture, and its relegation to a position of inferiority in relation to the *logos* or voiced *word*, to the philosophy of Plato, noticing that for Plato, «music is no laughing matter [...]. It is a texture so

Already from Aristotle's *Poetica*, logos is defined "phonè semantikè", and is distinguished from the voice of animals precisely by its semantics, e.g., by having a meaning: «The voice as prior to speech or independent of speech is therefore simply an animal voice — an a-logic and a-semantic phonation»<sup>58</sup>. According to Cavarero, therefore, in metaphysical philosophy, the important issue is the signification of language (its semantic dimension) and not its sound aspect. It is precisely this preference that leads to a hierarchisation of the senses:

By capturing the *phone* in the system of signification, philosophy not only makes a primacy of the voice with respect to speech all but inconceivable; it also refuses to concede to the vocal any value that would be independent of the semantic. Reduced to an acoustic signifier, the voice depends on the signified. This dependence is not only obvious, it is decisive, for it captures the voice in a complex system that subordinates the acoustic sphere to the realm of sight<sup>59</sup>

The dominance of the visual in Western philosophical tradition has often meant that the experience of the other senses touch, taste, smell and listening – has been filtered through a visualist framework. According to Cavarero, this predilection for the sphere of the eye and the idea that sight is the noblest of the five senses characterizes not only philosophy, but the entire Greek culture<sup>60</sup>, causing a disinterest that continues into

fundamental that any license inevitably produces general decadence; it undermines the social fabric, its laws and mores, and threatens the very ontological order». For Plato, according to Dolar, «the core of the danger is the voice that sets itself loose from the word, the voice beyond the logos, the lawless voice» Mladen Dolar, *A Voice and Nothing More*, MIT Press, Cambridge, 2006, p. 45.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>58</sup> Adriana Cavarero, op. cit., p. 34.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>59</sup> Ibid., p. 35.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>60</sup> On the same topic see: Mladen Dolar, op. cit.

contemporary culture and in the subject-object dichotomy built on the Cartesian model. As Pallasmaa notices, «the [...] hegemony of the eye seems to be parallel with the development of Western ego-consciousness»<sup>61</sup>.

It will be useful to sketch out some of the characteristics of the "oculocentric" self before turning to the auditory re-thinking of the same. As noted by Cavarero, the philosophical "metaphysical" subject, develops in the history of philosophy within the horizon of the Cartesian *cogito*:

Both the opposition between *body* and *thought*, as well as the construction of the subject on thought itself, i.e., ultimately on *reason*, come to the fore in Descartes' philosophy. This is a subject that has been defined as strong, self-founded, self-centered, and self-aware, capable of generating and stabilising itself in complete autonomy. [...] The subject conceived by Descartes has the merit of making transparent the way in which the universal essence of the subject is inscribed in modernity by explicitly displaying the omnipotent and conscious act of its self-construction<sup>62</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>61</sup> Juhani Pallasmaa, *The Eyes of the Skin. Architecture and the Senses*, John Whiley and Sons, Chichester, 2007, p. 28.

<sup>62 «</sup>Nella filosofia di Cartesio viene [...] massimamente alla luce sia l'opposizione fra *corpo* e *pensiero*, sia il costruirsi del soggetto sul pensiero medesimo, e cioè, in ultima analisi, sulla *ragione*. Si tratta di un soggetto che, non a caso, è stato definito forte, ossia autofondato, autocentrato e autocosciente, capace di generarsi e di stabilizzarsi in piena autonomia. [...] Il soggetto pensato da Cartesio ha insomma il merito di rendere trasparente il modo in cui l'essenza universale del soggetto si inscrive nella modernità mettendo esplicitamente in scena l'atto onnipotente e cosciente della sua autocostruzione» Adriana Cavarero, *Il pensiero femminista*. *Un approccio teoretico*, in: Adriana Cavarero, Franco Restaino *Le filosofie femministe*, Mondadori, Milano, 2002, p. 95.

The Cartesian subject, caught up in the categories of metaphysics constitutes «its entire categorical apparatus, on the sphere of vision»<sup>63</sup>. Given the long historical, and indeed logical, correspondence between the visual and the conceptual, highlighting the importance of the acoustic realm in the subject's formation leads to a re-thinking of the subject itself. As noted by Adrienne Janus there are three main limitations attending ocularcentrism:

The first is the limitations of the subject-object dichotomy and all dichotomies associated with it: mind-body, self-other, presence-absence, spiritual-material, speech-writing, transcendence-immanence. That the subject of this dichotomy is inevitably constituted by and through the capacity of discourse to produce meaning indicates the second limitation: a philosophy or world view for which signification is the final perspective, whether given by the Cartesian cogito, Enlightenment thought, transcendental or instrumental reason, or hermeneutics in general. The final limitation of a world view or philosophy in which sense-making as meaning is the final perspective is that it inevitably occludes, suppresses, and enacts violence against the body and sensual perception as a mode of world-appropriation<sup>64</sup>

If, according to the oculocentric tradition the mind and the ear are locked into a relationship of categorial alterity, while reason implies the separation of subject and object, the acoustic realm involves their union. It is the potential of concepts such as sound and resonance, as Michelle

<sup>63</sup> Adriana Cavarero, For more than one Voice, op. cit., p. 38.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>64</sup> Adrienne Janus, «Jean-Luc Nancy and the "Anti-Ocular" Turn in Continental Philosophy and Critical Theory», *Comparative Literature*, vol. 63, n. 2, 2011, pp. 182-202, p. 189.

Duncan describes, to dismantle «the dualism between subject and object that has governed perception and on which the logic of enlightened reason depends' that has seduced philosophers and theorists to a closer consideration of sound, audition and music»<sup>65</sup>. In acoustic perception there is no boundary between perceiver and perceived. In this point of view: «the listening self is implicated in the material world, rather than separate from it as the seeing self must be. The auditory self is therefore akin to a membrane, through which sounds move out and in»<sup>66</sup>.

Cultural historian Veit Erlmann proposes a fascinating theory in this regard. Erlmann published *Reason and Resonance: A History of Modern Aurality* in 2010. He agrees with the idea that philosophical thought traditionally relies on visual metaphors<sup>67</sup> but believes that the field of hearing is the «untold half»<sup>68</sup> of the same story, a story in which «truth and knowledge do not exist independently of the way in which they are acquired, and that subjectivity is not merely the impure other of objectivity»<sup>69</sup>. Paraphrasing the famous "cogito ergo sum" (I think therefore I am) with "cutio ergo sum" (from the latin *concussio*, tremor, shaking) Erlmann's goal is to trace a path through the broad discourse interlacing the aural concept of "resonance" to the philosophical dominant narrative of "reason", binding together «the association of self-reflection and consciousness with something one might – in analogy to introspection – call

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>65</sup> Michelle Duncan, «The Operatic Scandal of the Singing Body: Voice, Presence, Performativity», *Cambridge Opera Journal*, vol. 16, n. 3, 2004, pp. 283-306, p. 299.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>66</sup> Mary Noonan, *Echo's Voice. The theatres of Sarraute, Duras, Cixous and Renaude*, Taylor and Francis, Milton Park, 2017, p. 4.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>67</sup> See: Veit Erlmann, *Reason and Resonance: A History of Modern Aurality*, Zone Books, New York, 2010, p. 9.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>68</sup> Veit Erlmann, op. cit., p. 11.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>69</sup> Ibid., p. 11.

"introaudition"»<sup>70</sup>, for «these corresponding histories of reason and resonance are both a key element of modern cultural practice and at the heart of modern aurality»<sup>71</sup>.

Though philosophy's interest in sound and auditory perception has a history extending back much further than the last century, at least to Plato<sup>72</sup>, the twentieth century, and most especially the second half, appears to have witnessed a boom in this area of interest. According to Cavarero, this process happens in the second half of the twentieth century, since the anti-Cartesianism of Freudian discourse, the conscious and rational self-foundation of the subject necessarily shows illusory<sup>73</sup>.

The interconnection between auditory perception and historical and cultural progress is what shapes Roland Barthes' theories on audition as expressed in the essay *Listening*<sup>74</sup>. Barthes' argument has a typological foundation based on historical-anthropological research. The author outlines three main types of listening:

- 1. listening to indices
- 2. listening as deciphering
- 3. listening to the unconscious

We can associate the first type of listening identified by Barthes with the one we tried to outline in the first paragraph. It is an instinctive, prelinguistic type of listening: «on this level, nothing distinguishes animal from

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., p. 11.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>70</sup> Ibid., p. 10.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>72</sup> See: Adriana Cavarero, For more than One Voice, op. cit.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>73</sup> See: Adriana Cavarero and Franco Restaino, op. cit.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>74</sup> Roland Barthes, «Listening», in: Id., *The Representability of Forms. Critical Essays on Music, Art and Representation*, University of California Press, Berkley and Los Angeles, 1991, pp. 245-260, p. 251

man: the wolf listens for a (possible) noise of its prey, the hare for a (possible) noise of its hunter, the child and the lover for the approaching footsteps which might be the mother's or the beloved's»<sup>75</sup>. The second type of listening has to do with language (otherwise described as linguistic semiosis) and is an exclusively human prerogative: «what the ear tries to intercept are certain *signs* [...]. I listen the way I read, i. e., according to certain codes»<sup>76</sup>. In this case, we are talking about a form of listening that characterises the socially dominated subject, who elaborates reality's interpretation through codified practices (those, for example, of the disciple or the religious believer). The third type of listening – which does not supplant the two previous forms of listening, but is, we might say, an evolution of them – is an «entirely modern»<sup>77</sup> approach. It is, as Giovannetti describes it, the possibility to «listen to listening»<sup>78</sup>. In other words, the ability to listen to one's unconscious.

It is only after the discovery and the spread of a concept such as "unconscious", that the theories of several "oto-centric" thinkers develop, theorising in response to and subverting Western metaphysical oculocentric paradigms, i. e., «paradigms built around the rational, self-identical subject of reflexive consciousness, a subject whose mastery and dominance over self and world involves a "vision" that objectifies all it identifies and that silences the multiple resonances of the senses and of sensual difference"<sup>79</sup>.

In Downcast Eyes. The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-century French Thought, Martin Jay focuses on twentieth century French post structuralism labelling the movement as an «'anti-ocular' turn in

<sup>75</sup> Roland Barthes, «Listening», op. cit., p. 245.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>76</sup> Ibid., p. 245.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid

 $<sup>^{78}</sup>$  «Ascoltare l'ascolto» Paolo Giovannetti, *The Lunatic is in my Head*, op. cit., p. 73.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>79</sup> Adrienne Janus, art. cit., p. 84.

Continental philosophy» in which the visual paradigm tends to revisit its dominance. In Jay's genealogy of anti-ocularcentrists thinkers, particular importance is given to the French philosophy. According to Jay, the discourse gained intensity in France from the 1930s onwards through the importation and creative interpretation of the German phenomenological tradition: not only Heidegger, but also Husserl and Nietzsche. For Jay, these thinkers inspired the «explicit manifestations of hostility to visual primacy in the work of artists and critics like Georges Bataille and André Breton, philosophers like Jean- Paul Sartre, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Emmanuel Levinas, social theorists like Michel Foucault, Louis Althusser, and Guy Debord, psychoanalysts like Jacques Lacan and Luce Irigaray, cultural critics like Roland Barthes and Christian Metz, and poststructuralist theorists like Jacques Derrida and Jean-François Lyotard»<sup>80</sup>.

The following paragraphs will discuss post-structuralist thought's interest in auditory perception. Albeit in different ways, the philosophers whose theories we will present have all been influenced by Derrida's concept of deconstruction, namely:

a reading strategy or approach to texts that challenges and exposes a reliance on, or assumption of, hierarchical binaries that fix meaning as monolithic, oppositional, and singular, and instead explores the multiplicity of signifiers and the perpetual interplay of differences that constitute, but are never reducible to, their meaning, leading to what is perhaps Derrida's most famous concept: *différance*. Furthermore, the destabilisation of meaning parallels a decentering not only of the author but of the subject at large (again, famously, through

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>80</sup> Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes. The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-century French Thought*, University of California Press, Berkley, 1993, p. 14.

Derrida's critique of the logocentric metaphysics of presence) and thus, implicitly and sometimes explicitly, critiques the fiction of the objective, universal, self-same, straight, white male<sup>81</sup>

Poststructuralist philosophy, following Derridean deconstruction, is concerned with the overcoming of metaphysics, and thus refuses to ground or locate Being through reference to a predetermined fixed and unchanging point of reference; thus, identities are no longer mimetically determined as a mere reflection of some extra-worldly absolute and immaterial signified that guarantees subjective and epistemological stability.

## 1.2.1 Derrida's Otobiographies

As I briefly mentioned in the introduction, the title of this thesis combines the auditory perception's dimension to the self-narrative's one and is partly inspired by a 1976 lecture given by Jacques Derrida. The talk, entitled *Otobiographies*. *Nietzsche's Teaching and the Politics of the Proper Name*<sup>82</sup>, was written by Derrida to commemorate the bicentennial of the United States Declaration of Independence and develops as a commentary on the incipit of Nietzsche's *Ecce Homo*, concluding with some reflections on academic freedom. Observing that the ear «can make or let happen... it

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>81</sup> Sarah Hickmott, *Music, Philosophy and Gender in Nancy, Lacoue-Labarthe, Badiou*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2020, p.90.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>82</sup> The text was published in French as "Déclarations d'Indépendance" in *Otobiographies : L'enseignement de Nietzsche et la politique du nom propre*, Paris, Galilée, 1984, pp. 13-32. Most of the material contained in *Otobiographies* had been published previously under the title *L'oreille de l'autre: otobiographies, transferts, traductions*, Claude Lévesque and Christine V. McDonald (eds.), Montréal, VLB Éditeur, 1982, which has been translated into English as *The Ear of the Other: Otobiography, Transference, Translation*, Christine V. McDonald (ed.), Shocken Books, New York, 1985.

is the most tendered and open organ»<sup>83</sup>, Derrida elaborates a neologism which plays on the term "autobiography", whereby the "autos" of autobiographical discourse is transformed figuratively in the labyrinthine structure of the ear.

The prefix "Oto-", is a learned borrowing from Greek "οὖς ἀτός" (ούs otós) meaning "ear", which is used in the formation of compounds words such as "otology". Starting with Nietzsche's incipit of *Ecce Homo* – referring in particular to the line «I live on my own credit [I go along living on my own credit, the credit I establish and give myself; *Ich lebe auf meinen eigenen Kredit hin*]; it is perhaps a mere prejudice that I live [*vielleicht bloss ein Vorurteil dass ich lebe*]»<sup>84</sup> – Derrida questions the concept of subjectivity and states:

If the life that he lives and tells to himself ("autobiography," they call it) cannot be his life in the first place except as the effect of a secret contract, a credit account which has been both opened and encrypted, an indebtedness, an alliance or annulus, then as long as the contract has not been honoured – and it cannot be honoured except by another, for example, by you Nietzsche – can write that his life is perhaps a mere prejudice, "es ist vielleicht bloß ein Vorurteil dass ich lebe" 85

According to Derrida, the identity Nietzsche is declaring through writing «[...] has passed to him through the unheard-of contract he has

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>83</sup> Jacques Derrida, Otobiographies. The teaching of Nietzsche and the Politics of the Proper Name, in: Christine V. McDonald (ed.), The Ear of the Other: Otobiography, Transference, Translation, Shocken Books, New York, 1985, p. 33.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>84</sup> Nietzsche quoted in Derrida, *Otobiographies*, op. cit. p. 8.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>85</sup> Ibid., p. 9.

drawn up with himself»<sup>86</sup>. But the "secret contract" Derrida refers to also involves "the other", as Derrida defines otobiography as committing one's name and writing to the future (perhaps impossibly), anticipating its reception in advance. The philosopher believes that the testamentary survival and comprehension of Nietzsche's work rely above all on the reader counter-signing the text in the writer's own name:

It is the ear of the other that signs. The ear of the other says me to me and constitutes the *autos* of my autobiography. When, much later, the other will have perceived with a keenenough ear what I will have addressed or destined to him or her, then my signature will have taken place<sup>87</sup>

Derrida proposes the "Ear of the Other" as the place where the autobiography is told and takes shape. Thus, an autobiographical text becomes autobiographical only in the process of telling, emphasizing the reader's constitutive role in the relationship.

Derrida thus situates autobiographical writing<sup>88</sup> in a dual dimension of self-recognition and recognition by the other, employing a prefix

<sup>87</sup> Derrida, *Otobiographies*, op. cit. p. 51.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>86</sup> Ibid., p. 8.

Many of Derrida's theories on autobiography (developed throught his career in texts such as *Circonfessions* (1993), *Le monolinguisme de l'autre* (1996), *L'animal que donc je suis* (2006)) explored the connection between self autonomy and relational identity, contibuting to the studies on self-writing in theorists like John Eakin and Susanna Egan (See: John Eakin *How Our Lives Become Stories: Making Selves,* Cornell University Press, New York, 1999 and Susanna Egan, «Encounters on Camera: Autobiography as interaction», *Modern Fiction Studies*, vol. 40, n.3, 1994, pp. 593-618). For an overview on the centrality of autobiography in Derrida's theories, see: Robert Smith, *Derrida and Autobiography*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1995, and Joseph G. Kronick «*Philosophy as Autobiography*: The Confessions of Jacques Derrida», *MLN*, vol. 115, n. 5, 2000, pp. 997-1018.

borrowed from the acoustic realm, a deeply intersubjective realm. As Roland Barthes states: «Listening speaks»<sup>89</sup> i.e., the act of listening comes with the desire be listened to. In Barthes' words: «[t]he injunction to listen is the total interpellation of one subject by another: it places above everything else the quasi-physical contact of these subjects (by voice and ear): it creates transference: "listen to me" means touch me, know that I exist»<sup>90</sup>. The intersubjective aspect of acoustic perception is also outlined in *Keywords in Sound* (2015), a quite recent Sound Studies research, where we read under the heading 'hearing':

The simple act of hearing implies a medium for sound, a body with ears to hear, a frame of mind to do the same, and a dynamic relation between hearer and heard that allows for the possibility of mutual effects. Hearing is all these things: it is human nature and human history, deeply personal and irreducibly intersubjective, environmentally grounded and stretched toward transcendence. When we study hearing, we hold its elements in tension with one another<sup>91</sup>

It seems clear at this point that Derrida uses a prefix from the auditory and thus inter-relational sphere to describe an autobiography that is never self-referential. In Derrida's theorisation, otherness is not necessarily to be considered external to the subject since otherness is itself a component of the subject and manifests itself in the writing process. The written self is "other" than the self. As Igor Pelgreffi notes:

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>89</sup> Roland Barthes, «Listening», p.259.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>90</sup> Roland Barthes, «Listening», in: *The Representability of Forms. Critical Essays on Music, Art and Representation*, University of California Press, Berkley and Los Angeles, 1991, pp. 245-260, p. 251

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>91</sup> Jonathan Sterne, «Hearing», in: David Novak and Matt Sakakeeny (eds.), *Keywords in Sound*, Duke University Press, Durham, 2015, p. 65.

Autobiography allows the dynamic convergence between *autos* (self) and *eteros* (other) to take place and unfold in the medium of writing, as suggested by the play on words, "Otobiographies", which combines "auto" and "oto" (a root that refers to the ear, the organ of the body that is always open to the external world). The difference between the two is only in their writing, as they are vocally inseparable. The intermediary function of writing is a crucial point. The postulation of alterity within the writing-living self thus implies the inclusion of an element of non-control, of chance, and openness to the unpredictable at the "origin" of the autobiographical, an "heteroaffection in the system of self-affection of the living present of consciousness" 92

<sup>92 «</sup>L'autobiografia lascia accadere la convergenza dinamica fra autos e eteros, la quale ha luogo e prende tempo nel medium della scrittura, come vorrebbe forse il gioco omofonico ma disgrafico nella parola Otobiographies: fra auto e oto (radicale che rimanda all'orecchio, organo del corpo sempre aperto all'esterno), c'è differenza solo nella scrittura, mentre sono vocalmente indissociabili. La funzione di intermediazione della scrittura è un punto decisivo [...]. La postulazione dell'alterità nel cuore del sé scrivente-vivente implica quindi l'inclusione di una quota di non-controllo, di casualità e apertura all'imprevedibile nel punto "originario" dell'autobiografico, una "etero-affezione nel sistema dell'autoaffezione del presente vivente della coscienza"» Igor Pelgreffi, «Animale autobiografico. Derrida e la scrittura dell'autos», Lo sguardo. Rivista di filosofia, n.11, 2013, pp. 229-298, p. 237. The final quote is from: Jacques Derrida, Résistances – de la psychanalyse, Paris, 1996, p. 43. Pelgreffi continues by highliting the importance of the concept of "other" in Derrida's theories: «Il concetto di altro è uno dei centri logici nella filosofia derridiana, malgrado non vi assuma una connotazione univoca. L'altro è l'inconscio, il corpo, il non-senso, l'opacità di un resto fisico; oppure, nel senso etico-levinassiano, è un altro soggetto che importa in me una relazione unheimlich, la quale mi estranea; oppure, in un senso strutturalistico, l'altro è la precedenza delle sedimentazioni linguistiche, cioè il segno che mi forma riconvocando in me la differenza e la non-coincidenza.», [the notion of "other" is one of the cores in Derrida's philosophy despite the fact that it does not take on an unambiguous connotation. The other is the unconscious, the

The otobiographical subject in Derrida's thought is characterized by a unique openness to external listening, both to the reader as the other and to the other within itself. This acoustic-based reconfiguration presupposes a subject that is not self-grounded, but rather one that understands itself in terms of inter-relationship and inter-dependence.

## 1.2.2 Lacoue-Labarthe's Echo of the Subject

In his short but intricate essay *The Echo of the Subject*, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe broadens on Derrida's argument – particularly the relationship between sonority and autobiographical impulse. Published in 1979, *L'Écho du sujet* proceeds from what Lacoue-Labarthe intuits to be true, based on a trilogy of citations from Valéry, Mallarmé and Hölderlin, all of which suggesting that the self is – in some way – an echo<sup>93</sup>.

The philosopher tries to investigate the relationship between music and philosophy and, above all the relationship between music and autobiography. He seeks to show how musical and poetic rhythms might be fundamentally linked to corporeal, psychological, spiritual, and deep

body, the non-sense, the opacity of a physical remainder; or, in the ethical-Levinassian sense, it is *another subject* that imports into me an *unheimlich* relation, which alienates *me*; or, in a structuralist sense, the other is the precedence of linguistic sedimentations, that is, the sign that forms *me* by reconjuring in me difference and non-coincidence], Igor Pelgreffi, art.cit., Ibid.

<sup>93</sup> «Il faut bien avouer que le moi n'est qu'un écho [It must be confessed that the self is nothing but an echo] Valéry/ Tout est rythme [Rhythmus], le destin tout entier de l'homme est un seul rythme céleste, de même que l'œuvre d'art est un unique rythme [All is rhythm; the entire destiny of man is one celestial rhythm, just as the work of art is a unique rhythm] Hölderlin. . . parce que toute âme est un noeud rythmique [. . . because every soul is a rhythmic knot] Mallarmé» Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, «The Echo of the Subject», in: Id., *Typography. Mimesis, Philosophy, Politics*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1989, pp. 139-207.

"ontological" rhythms that would provide insights into subjectivity that remain inaccessible to the rationalist tradition and its "mimetological" definition of subjectivity. He asks himself:

What connection is there between autobiography and music? More precisely, and to make things a bit more explicit: What is it that ties together autobiography, that is to say, the autobiographical compulsion [*Zwang*] (the need to tell, to confess, to write oneself), and music – the haunting by music or the musical obsession? [...] the question proposed here belongs to the more general problematic of the *subject*<sup>94</sup>

Although the philosopher's essay primarly centers on musical obsession, the aspect I will focus on is Lacoue-Labarthe's reconfiguration of the subject: the autobiographical subject's relationship to sound/sonority and, as well as the ways in which an aural perspective can contribute to a philosophical reconsideration of subjectivity. The philosopher addresses the issue from the very beginning of his argument:

Because it appeals first of all to the notion and the fact of autobiography, the question proposed here belongs to the more general problematic of the *subject*, and in this case, the writing subject. Or rather, though this can come down to the same thing if we attend to the ambiguity of the reflexive construction [...], the subject that writes itself [s'écrit]: that writes about the subject, that is written about, that is written – in short, the subject that is one, "one", only insofar as it is in some way or other inscribed. Taking advantage of what can be condensed in the genitive and in the double sense (at least) that adheres to the word "subject" in our language, I might say simply: *the subject* 

<sup>94</sup> Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, op. cit., p. 140.

of writing. [...] It is based obviously on the irreversible displacement to which the thought of writing, quite removed from the reigning formalism or from its opposite, submits the "modern" relation between literature and subject (or discourse and subject, text and subject, and so on; the various denominations are unimportant here) – a displacement that comes about, beyond Heidegger and classical psychoanalysis (from Freud to Lacan, let's say), if only through this thought's shaking of such philosophemes or conceptual assemblages as signification and meaning [vouloir dire], identity, integrity, auto-affection, self-presence, and alienation. Or if only through its shaking of a term such as "subject", since it still holds firm, be it as divided subject, split subject, absent, emptied, etc<sup>95</sup>

To explain his theory, Lacoue-Labarthe uses as his point of departure the autobiographical writings of psychoanalyst Theodor Reik, in particular *The Haunting Melody: Psychoanalytic Experiences in Life and Music.* As Reik suggests by his title, music played an important role in his life.

In contrast to Goethe, who received his best and most significant impressions through the eye, I was, as the French psychologists would say, a "*type auditif*". I was not just blind as a bat, but most of my impressions and memories were connected with the ear – of an auditory character<sup>96</sup>

Lacoue-Labarthe notices that «music is the "web" of [Reik's] memories» <sup>97</sup>, and among Reik's memories Lacoue-Labarthe recognises

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>95</sup> Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, op. cit., p. 141.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>96</sup> Theodor Reik quoted in Lacoue Labarthe, op. cit., p. 160.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>97</sup> Ibid., p. 160.

what he calls "catacoustic" phenomena<sup>98</sup>, i. e., «a reminiscence, the return [...] of a melodic fragment»<sup>99</sup>.

As Lacoue-Labarthe notes, Reik's autobiographical experiences were crucial in providing him with the central insight of the "third ear," his major contribution to psychoanalytic theory, namely the discovery that analysts needed to listen to their patients' vocal patterns as well as to the semantic content of their words. As Lacoue-Labarthe notes, the "third ear", which was considered by Nietzsche «the "artistic" or "stylistic" ear that discerns in writing, discourse, or a language a fundamental musicality – fundamental, above all, in that it makes *sense*» 101, in Reik's view «defines the analytic listening, that is to say, the interpretation of the unconscious from out of the unconscious. It is, says Reik, "the means of detecting the substructures of the soul" Note: According to Reik then, the unconscious part of language lies in its musical aspects. By analysing Reik's theories, Lacoue-Labarthe also notes that:

[W]hile the unconscious perception considered here is perfectly diversified (sight, smell, touch, etc.) and concerns the outer habitus or "surface" of tile other, it is in reality audition, strictly speaking, that is determinant. All perception is at bottom listening. Or, in other terms that come down to the same thing, listening is the paradigm (not the metaphor) of perception in general. The unconscious *speaks*<sup>103</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>98</sup> Ibid., p. 150.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>100</sup> Theodor Reik, *Listening with the Third Ear*, Farrar Staus and Giroux, New York, 1948.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>101</sup> Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, op. cit., p. 161.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>102</sup> Ibid., p. 162.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

Lacoue-Labarthe, while trying to untangle Reik's insistence on the musicality of language and memory's work, underlines the difficulty of analysing sound and rhythm – as any pre-verbal phenomenon – through language:

On the one hand, there is the register of the verbal (the "more than acoustic", if you will), presiding, at least as model, over the description of the operations of the unconscious, of its writing which has been coded through displacement, condensation, the play of tropes etc., and above all presiding over the description of the formation of the Ego and the Superego. On the other hand, there is the register which cannot be called simply the figural (despite the concern with Darstellbarkeit), but which must also be considered that of the imaginary in that it cuts across every stage of the Freudian construction, from the image, through the fantasy and the dream scene, to the ideal. It is as if Reik blurred all the divisions (often strict) to which Freud submits, and plunged into a sort of hole or gap between the "symbolic," if you will, and the imaginary – a hole that is not necessarily occupied by something like the "real," be it consigned to impossibility<sup>104</sup>

Lacoue-Labarthe affirms that Reik's cathacoustic phenomena are thus «untheorizable»<sup>105</sup> since they «escape the metaphysical (theoretical) distinctions that always underlie [linguistic distinctions] (sensible/intelligibile, matter/form, body/spirit, thing/idea, and so on)»<sup>106</sup>. Cathacoustic phenomena are events that do not concern the semantic part of language, but the part *preceding* signification:

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>104</sup> Ibid., p. 153.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>105</sup> Ibid., p. 160.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>106</sup> Ibid.

Everything happens at the level of audition or listening, but what is heard and begins to make sense [...] is not, strictly speaking, of the order of language. Rather, it affects a language, and affects in the use of a language [...] its *musical* part, prosodic or melodic. Reik is interested, as we see, in the *voice*: intonation, elocution, tone, inflections, melisma, rhythm, even timber (or what Barthes calls "grain")<sup>107</sup>.

Lacoue-Labarthe recognises that the failure to theorise an acoustic event is part of a larger philosophical problem, namely the philosophical hierarchisation of the senses, or what Jonathan Sterne has more recently referred to as the «audio-visual litany»<sup>108</sup>. Similarly to Didier Anzieu, Lacoue-Labarthe attempts to overcome this distinction by referring to hearing as a pre-specular perception:

The interesting thing about the phenomenon at which it aims, as we can easily see, is that it should make it possible to return, by basing the analysis initially on the intra philosophical distinction between the visible (the theoretical, the eidetic, and scopic, etc.) and the audible (or the acoustic, and I do not say the verbal), to the *hither side* of the "theoretical threshold" itself. It should make it possible to return to the place where the *theory of the subject* (but perhaps also *the subject of theory*) would see itself, if I may say so, obliged to put into question its privileged apparatus, its instrument, which, from Plato to Lacan, is a specular instrument. And a *speculative* apparatus. The question, in this sense, would be "infra-theoretical" and would bear upon the pre-specular. More precisely, I would ask, albeit from out of

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>107</sup> Ibid., p. 159.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>108</sup> Jonathan Sterne, *The Audible Past. Cultural origins of Sound Reproduction*, Duke University Press, Durham, 2003, p.18.

theory itself [...] whether there is, whether there can be, a prespecular, and what this might mean or involve. To refer to our mythology – I mean psychoanalysis – I would like to know [...] what happens when one goes back from Narcissus to Echo<sup>109</sup>

Lacoue-Labarthe's main goal then, is to disarm philosophy's visual-based point of view and, to overcome the limitations of the split specular subject by re-imagining a theory in terms borrowed from the acoustic domain, with rhythm playing a central role. This will entail shifting "from Narcissus to Echo," or from the specular gaze to the production of subjectivity through rhythmic repetition, similar to how motifs are used in musical composition. Thus, Lacoue-Labarthe not only deconstructs mimetic representation and the modes of subjective self-reflection associated with it. He also suggests that rhythm is prior to the emergence of any kind of visual representation or figure. Summarising, Lacoue-Labarthe's aim is to consider with autos and its self-relation as rhythm»<sup>110</sup>. As Derrida points out, rhythm has an important deconstructive function, since it calls into question both philosophical sense-hierarchisation and psychoanalytic theories of subject formation:

Why does the motif of rhythm, when articulated in this way with that of typographical inscription, possess such effective deconstructive power? Because it ties together several possibilities. It makes it possible to open a new problematic of the subject (of its "character," of what prescribes or preinscribes it, also divides it according to the cut and the repetition of a desistance) by turning the Heideggerian deconstruction away from a metaphysics of

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>109</sup> Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, op. cit., p. 146.

Jacques Derrida, «Desistance», introduction to Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, in: Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, op. cit., pp. 1-42, p. 31.

subjectity – that is to say, by removing the subject from its determination by the notions of the self, consciousness, representation, and optical or discursive objectivity, and by thus assuming in it a psychoanalytic dimension. But simultaneously, the motif of rhythm makes it possible to deconstruct, in a certain philosophy of psychoanalysis, *both* the hegemony of the visual, of the image or of the specular, *and* the hegemony of discursivity – for example, that of the verbal text in music. These two hegemonies have never been incompatible; on the contrary, they are coordinated in the history of metaphysics, which still commands these psychoanalytic theories, from Freud to Lacan<sup>111</sup>

The rhythmic subject theorised by Reik and then elaborated in deconstructive fashion by Lacoue-Labarthe has a few aspects that Eric Prieto summarised clearly by highlighting three fundamental characteristics:

1) Repetition as organization. Whether on the psychic or the musical plane, repetition plays a crucial role in the production of meaning. Psychically, it helps to "bind" or "discharge" disruptive elements of incongruity [...]. Musically, it organizes potentially disruptive thematic materials into productive signifying structures. In both cases, it creates patterns that reveal underlying structures and deeper levels of meaning. 2) Pattern as revelatory of meaning. In both song and psychoanalysis, it is necessary for the audience/analyst to extrapolate meaning not only from the verbal content of the discourse (the lyrics/the confession) but also from non-verbal patterns and inflections. This is an obvious point in music, but it

<sup>111</sup> Ibid., p. 32.

counts as one of Reik's main contributions to psychoanalytic theory. [...] 3) Rhythm as ethos. According to Reik, all individuals, like all musical works, have a characteristic rhythmic profile, which reveals their fundamental character or ethos. In other words the large-scale behavioural patterns of an individual can be analysed in much the same way as the patterns of repetition and variation in musical works. Lacoue-Labarthe concurs, invoking the Platonic and Aristotelian association between rhythmic modes in music, lexis in oratory, and the ethos of the speaker as support for this argument<sup>112</sup>

By summarising Lacoue-Labarthes' rhythmic subject's main features, Prieto emphasises an important aspect of the subject's rhythmic construction, namely repetition. This aspect, as Derrida points out, is reminiscent of the post-structuralist concept of desistance, which Derrida theorises in the preface to Lacoue-Labarthe's *Typographies*:

In the beginning, rhythm, says von Bühlow. Another way of marking the fact that there is no simple beginning; no rhythm without repetition, spacing, caesura, the "repeated difference-from-itself of the Same," says Lacoue-Labarthe – and thus repercussion, resonance, echo, reverberation. We are constituted by this rhythm, in other words (*de-)constituted* by the marks of this "caesuraed" stamp, by this rhythmo-typy which is nothing other than the divided idiom in us of desistance. A rhythm collects us and divides us in the prescription of a character. There is no subject without the signature of this rhythm, in us and before us, before any image, any discourse, before music

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>112</sup> Eric Prieto, «Musical Imprints and Mimetic Echoes in Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe», *L'Esprit Créateur*, vol. 47, n.2, 2007, pp. 17-32, pp. 27-28.

itself. "Rhythm would also be the condition of possibility for the subject," as Lacoue-Labarthe says in "The Echo of the Subject". We are "rhythmed" in such a way that rhythm no longer comes to us as a predicate. The "character" it imprints or prescribes is not the attribute of the being we are, not an attribute of our existence. No, before the stance of our being-present, before its consistency, its existence, and its essence, there is rhythmic desistance<sup>113</sup>

"Desistance" is, according to Derrida, the deferred temporality that characterises the subject. It is a primary component, a constitutive delay in the subject self-recognition and is connected to the fact that the subject, once existing, delays recognising itself as such. On the contrary, thinking of rhythm as a primary component of the subject, in Lacoue-Labarthe's vision, means returning to a pre-specular moment of recognition. In this way, the subject is no longer fractured, as from the very beginning is immersed in an inter-relational condition in which it listens and listens to itself, recognising itself as a subject. That's why musical obsession connects with autobiographical impetus, since «music is cast as the emotive "echo" of an originary opening which is traceable (theoretically, if not empirically) to infancy: to the archaeological pre-history of the not-yet-subject» 114. Derrida states that «to treat rhythm is thus not to add a chapter to the new typography of the subject. It is to think desistance as it is written. "Before" any specular reflexivity, before any autobiographical "image" and even any

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>113</sup> Jacques Derrida, 'Desistance' introduction to Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, in: Id., *Typography; Mimesis, Philosophy, Politics*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge Massachussets, 1989, pp. 1-42, p. 31.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>114</sup> Sarah Hickmott, «Beyond Lacoue-Labarthe's Alma Mater: mus(e)ic, myth and modernity», *L'Esprit Créateur*, vol. 57, n. 4, pp. 174-188, p. 176.

autobiographical [...] "discourse"»<sup>115</sup>. Rhythm is thus able to «to touch on an origin and a beginning anterior to the point where myth, philosophy, and literature separate»<sup>116</sup>. Since rhythm appears to be trace of our forgotten origins, the "catacoustic" subject – the subject that is given to "itself" prespecularly through echo, rather than through reflection – is profoundly linked to infancy, and to pre-verbal development. It is therefore not surprising that, as was already the case in Anzieu's theories, Lacoue-Labarthe refers to the "bain sonore" in the maternal voice as a key element in the formation of the subject. The concluding section of L'Écho du sujet, entitled "La clôture maternelle" is dedicated to the importance of the prosodic aspects of the mother's voice for the foetus. It is in this conception of musical pre-specular rhythm that Lacoue-Labarthe locates music's emotional power, because of the way it incites a reminiscence of the prespecular experience of the mother's voice; By quoting Nietzsche's Ecce Homo's opening riddle «I am... already dead as my father, while as my mother I am still living and becoming old», he writes:

Of what else, other than the mother, could there in fact be reminiscence? What other voice could come back to us? What else could echo, resonate in us, seem familiar to us? Let us recall the "place where each of us once dwelled," the "I know this, I've already been here" – and thus, "I've already heard it." Plato thought that mothers are the ones who impose or imprint upon each of us our type. How else, in fact would we be

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>115</sup> Jacques Derrida, «Desistance», in: Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, op. cit., p. 31.

wtoucher à une origine et à un commencement antérieur au point où se séparent mythe, philosophie et literature» Aristide Bianchi and Leonid Kharlamov, «Présentation», in Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *Pour n'en pas finir: écrits sur la musique*, Paris, Bourgois, 2015, p. 12.

"rhythmed"? And do we have the means to pass beyond this limit?<sup>117</sup>

I will have the opportunity to develop an argument on the crucial role of the mother's voice in the process of acoustic (de)construction of subjectivity in the section titled "from Narcissus to Echo". At present, it is important to keep in mind that the importance which both Lacoue-Labarthe and – as we will briefly see – Nancy attribute to the mother's voice locates these two philosophers within the Nietzschean tradition that Kristeva adopts in her characterisation of the *chora*. For Kristeva, the rhythmic is a state of being that is exterior to and preceding the social, verbal, thinking subject, while the latter is a kind of construct that simultaneously represents (in images and in symbols) and represses its musical other, which is also its origin.

## 1.2.3 Nancy's resonance and the diapason subject

In 2002, French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy published a short essay entitled  $\hat{A}$  *l'écoute*. In the essay, the philosopher reflects on acoustic perception in its most natural dimension, i.e., the dimension that entangles the subject to the world before any definite conceptual apparatus or explanation. Nancy's project, like Lacoue-Labarthe's<sup>118</sup>, is concerned with metaphysics' overcoming, and thus refuses to ground or locate Being

It is to perpetuate the analysis of the rhythmical constitution of subjectivity that Jean-Luc Nancy invokes and repeatedly returns to Lacoue-Labarthes theories. For Nancy, Lacoue-Labarthe's name itself suggests a rhythmic construction and self-reflection through repetition: «I am interested finally in nothing but the resonance of a voice, a voice that prolongs its reverberation in the thought of Lacoue-Labarthe (is his name not already an echo of itself? La...la...: he hears me...» Jean-Luc Nancy, *Listening*, Fordham University Press, New York, 2007, p. 72.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>117</sup> Lacoue-Labarthe, op. cit., pp. 105-106.

through reference to a predetermined fixed and unchanging point of reference. As Giovannetti notes, Nancy's investigation into the sense of hearing and the possibility of outlining a "philosophy of listening" originated from the reading of a sentence by Hegel:

In recent years, Jean-Luc Nancy has admitted that his 2002 essay was inspired by a statement from Hegel's *Aesthtetics*, which reads as follows: "The ear [...] without practically turning toward objects, perceives the result of that internal vibration of the body, with which the first and most ideal sphere of the soul appears." It is not far from the truth to say that the foundation of individual identity is listening, understood as the action of receiving precisely an "internal vibration of the body" 119

Nancy's attempt to construct a philosophical theory based on auditory perception as the "most ideal sphere of the soul" must be considered in its groundbreaking nature. His desire to overthrow the traditional sensual hierarchy stems from his desire to re-think the development of ego-consciousness in a reality that does not rely on a subject-object dichotomy. Additionally, he aims to develop a philosophy that values sensual perception as a key aspect of human experience, in contrast to the Western emphasis on ocularcentrism and conceptual abstraction. In doing so, Nancy not only critiques these traditional

<sup>119 «</sup>In anni recenti, Jean-Luc Nancy ha ammesso che il suo saggio del 2002 è ispirato a un'affermazione di Hegel (tratta dall'Estetica), che suona così: «L'orecchio [...], senza praticamente volgersi verso gli oggetti, percepisce il risultato di quella interna vibrazione del corpo, con cui viene ad apparire [...] la prima e più ideale sfera dell'anima». Non si è lontani dal vero se si afferma che il fondamento dell'identità individuale è l'ascolto, inteso come l'azione di recepire appunto un'"interna vibrazione del corpo» Paolo Giovannetti, «The Lunatic is in my Head», op. cit. p. 89.

approaches but also proposes the possibility of a philosophy that listens and is attentive to meaning beyond mere logos.

In Nancy's philosophy: «the focus is not on the ear as an object, but in which the ear figures as a form of embodied knowledge, as something we think with» 120. Ultimately, the philosopher's theory offers a new way to think of significance herself: «[t]o listen is to enter that spatiality by which, at the same time, I am penetrated, for it opens up in me as well as around me, and from me as well as toward me: it opens me inside me as well as outside»<sup>121</sup>. Nancy does not mean "listening" in the sense of "listening to something", but in the sense of "resonance". His concern is to suggest the conditions for an ontology, a philosophical way of thinking and writing based on listening as a mode of attending to the resonances that reverberate between self and world, the psychic and the bodily, the intellectual and the sensual, namely a "singular/plural" reality. In Nancy's point of view, sense is no longer an objectifiable truth, a stable form, but is instead a *«renvoi»* (return/ send back/ repeat)<sup>123</sup>, a relational and mobile dimension: «[i]t is a present in waves on a swell, not in a point on a line; it is a time that opens up, that is hollowed out, that is enlarged or ramified, that envelops or separates, that becomes or is turned into a loop, that stretches out or contracts, and so on»<sup>124</sup>. When Nancy shifts from the dimension of sound – and thus of reality – to the dimension of listening – and thus of perception – the philosopher's discourse focuses primarily on the subject of listening: «What does it mean for a being to be immersed entirely in listening, formed

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>120</sup> Veit Erlmann, *Reason and Resonance. A History of Modern Aurality*, Zone Books, New York, 2010, p. 24 (emphasis in original).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>121</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, op. cit., p. 27.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>122</sup> I am here referring to Jean-Luc Nancy's idea of existence as co-existence (being-with) as expressed in Id., *Being Singular Plural*, Stanford University Press, Redwood City, 2000.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>123</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, *Listening*, op.cit., p. 7.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>124</sup> Ibid., p. 13.

by listening or in listening, listening with all his being?»<sup>125</sup>. According to the interpretation of Nancy's commentator Adrienne Janus, the philosopher believes that listening means living in the world of resonance and *renvoi*, that is living a space of both perception and proprioception:

the space that opens the self to itself and to the world as presence to self. This presence, however, is not the visually (or conceptually) identifiable presence of that which "lets itself be objectified or projected outward", but rather consists in "a coming and a passing, an extending (*s'étendre*) and a penetrating"<sup>126</sup>

This theory leads to a radical rethinking of senses. According to Nancy listening is not a sense, but a beyond-sense, and resonance is the ultimate component of reality. In Nancy's words:

to listen is to enter into that spatiality by which, at the same time, I am penetrated, for it [the spatiality] opens itself in me as well as around me, and from me as well as toward me: it opens me inside me as well as outside, and it is through such a double, quadruple or septuple opening that a "self" can take place<sup>127</sup>

According to this perspective, Nancy re-thinks the subject as «diapason-subjet»<sup>128</sup>, an entity whose features cannot be described according to the subject-object dichotomy, but only through the already

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>125</sup> Ibid., p. 4.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>126</sup> Adrienne Janus, «Listening: Jean-Luc Nancy and the "Anti-Ocular" Turn in Continental Philosophy and Critical Theory», *Comparative Literature*, vol. 63, n°2, 2011, pp. 182-202, p. 194.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>127</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, op.cit., p. 14.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>128</sup> Ibid., p. 16.

mentioned concepts of "resonance" and "renvoi". As opposed to the traditional reflexivity or self-consciousness, the "diapason-subject" have no fixed identity, because, from the very beginning of their life, they are continuously deferring from themselves:

Perhaps we should thus understand the child who is born with his first cry as himself being — his being or his subjectivity — the sudden expansion of an echo chamber, a vault where what tears him away and what summons him resound at once, setting in vibration a column of air, of flesh, which sounds at its apertures: body and soul of some one new and unique. Someone who comes to himself by hearing himself cry (answering the other? calling him?), or sing, always each time, beneath each word, crying or singing, exclaiming as he did by coming into the world<sup>129</sup>

Nancy's scrutiny of the subject as an "echo-chamber", leads to its decentering and reformulation. Nancy tightens the link between the 'autos' and the 'oto' already present in Derrida's *Otobiographies*, by shifting the terms of this dynamic back onto the body of the self. For Nancy the otobiographical self is not only the one who depends on the ear of the other, it equally depends on its own sense of hearing to become what it is: the one who is both constructed and undone by its ear. «To be listening», Nancy continues, «is thus to enter into tension and to be on the lookout for a relation to self: *not*, it should be emphasized, a relationship to 'me'...or to the "self" of the other...but to *the relationship in self*, so to speak, as it forms a "self" or a "to itself" in general...»<sup>130</sup>. Nancy, as Derrida before, explains that through listening, the subject refers back to itself as "other". This

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>129</sup> Ibid., p. 17.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>130</sup> Ibid., p. 12.

referral allows for simultaneous listening to the world and to oneself, a reflexivity of sound that, in a phenomenological perspective, means being present to oneself, i. e., feeling. The rapport en soi, is not self-presence, (has nothing to do with hearing oneself speak) but happens in a movement of spatial and temporal non-presence. Nancy labels this condition «sonorous present»<sup>131</sup>, that is the moment in which the subject «encounters itself»<sup>132</sup>. As Marilia Librandi notes:

Such a framing effectively transcends the subject-object distinction and goes back from the phenomenological subject, as intentional line of sight, to a resonant subject, an intensive spacing of a rebound that does not end in any return to self without immediately relaunching, as an echo, a call to the same  $self^{133}$ 

Nancy makes an important point about learning from poets and writers to develop a philosophy of listening. Listening is an escape from the dominance of language and signification for artists, who are often concerned with extra semantic modes of signification such as timbre and tone. Poets and writers are echo-cambers who work with the invisible line that separates interiority and exteriority. Enrica Lisciani Petrini, in her introduction to the Italian edition of Listening (All'Ascolto, 2002) highlights how Nancy's theory is undeniably linked to an idea of the subject as the subject-creator, namely the artist:

The sound constitutively resonates, and in resonating it necessarily produces the act of being listened to. It is here that one comes to understand the decisive relevance this dimension

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>131</sup> Ibid., p. 13.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>132</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, *Listening*, op.cit., p. 16.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>133</sup> Marilia Librandi, op. cit., p. 14.

acquires in Nancy's discourse. Because in listening – more than in sound as such – the relational texture, the infinite reverberation of references, which Nancy wants to give an ontological relevance to, becomes most evident. He identifies it as another modality of "co-being" [a definition developed by Nancy in *Ego Sum*]: of being together, intertwined in infinite relational waves, of all things of all beings, that co-being for which the ear of the poet and the artist is grafted<sup>134</sup>

At one point during his investigation, Nancy describes the possibility for the diapason subject to recognise its subjectivity in the text. The following quote will help understand the meaning of the listening subject as text as theorised by Nancy:

Sense, if there is any, when there is any, is never a neutral, colorless, or aphonic sense: even when written, it has a voice — and that is also the most contemporary meaning of the word *écrire* ["to write"], perhaps in music as well as in literature. *Écrire* in its modern conception — elaborated since Proust, Adorno, and Benjamin, through Blanchot, Barthes, and to Derrida's *archi-écriture* — is nothing other than making sense resound beyond signification, or beyond itself. It is

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<sup>134 «</sup>Il suono costitutivamente risuona, e nel risuonare necessariamente produce l'esser ascoltato. Ed è qui che si arriva a capire quanto questa dimensione acquisti nel discorso di Nancy una rilevanza decisiva. Perché nell'ascolto – più ancora che nel suono in quanto tale – balza alla massima evidenza quella tramatura relazionale, quell'infinito riverbero di rinvii, al quale Nancy vuol dare un rilievo ontologico, individuando in esso un'altra modalità del "con-essere" [definizione sviluppata da Nancy in *Ego Sum*]: dell'essere insieme, intrecciati in infinite onde relazionali, di tutte le cose di tutti gli esseri, quel con-essere per il quale l'orecchio del poeta e dell'artista è innestato» Enrica Lisciani Petrini *Introduzione* in: Jean-Luc Nancy, *All'Ascolto*, Raffaello Cortina Editore, Milano, 2002, p. XXII.

vocalizing a sense that, for classical thought, intended to remain deaf and mute, an understanding [entente] untimbred [détimbrée] of self in the silence of a consonant without resonance. Francis Ponge writes: "Not only any poem at all, but any text at all —whatever it is — carries (in the full sense of the word), carries, I say, its speaking [diction]. For my part — if I examine myself writing — I never come to write the slightest phrase without my writing being accompanied by a mental speaking and listening, and even, rather, without it being preceded by those things (although indeed just barely). Speaking — speaking and listening, as Ponge makes clear, for speaking is already its own listening — is the echo of the text in which the text is made and written, opens up to its own sense as to the plurality of its possible senses. It is not, and in any case not only, what one can call in a superficial way the musicality of a text: it is more profoundly the music in it, or the arch-music of that resonance where it *listens to itself* [s'écoute], by listening to itself finds itself [se trouve], and by finding itself deviates [s'ecarte] from itself in order to resound further away, listening to itself before hearing/understanding itself, and thus actually becoming its "subject," which is neither the same as nor other than the individual subject who writes the text<sup>135</sup>

The "listening subject as text" thus does not only designates the listening subject who writes the text, nor the reader of the text, rather, the listening subject as text seems to emerge as the echo of this kind of speaking and listening against and through the body of text and reader, in the *renvoi* of the senses that fuses text and reader and that «opens [the text] up to its

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>135</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, *Listening*, op.cit., p. 35.

own sense as to the plurality of its possible senses»<sup>136</sup>. For Adrianne Janus, the question of resonance is strictly connected to what she calls the «rhythmical constitution of subjectivity» in Nancy<sup>137</sup>. The resonant body refuses the singular/plural dichotomy of the reality, a reality where «all existents, those past and those to come, the living and the dead of the objects, fauna, mechanics, of humans themselves – all of which make up the world of being»<sup>138</sup>. Nancy believes that only through this resonant movement, i.e., through a relation to the self as other, a real «access to self»<sup>139</sup> can occur.

## 1.3. From Narcissus to Echo

The logocentric nature of Western philosophical reflection that descends from Plato, pursuing the unity of the multiple, appears to bring with it the aspiration for a logocentric thinking that pays less attention to the corporeal dimension of being. The subject formation is built around language and through the appropriation of *logos* (what Lacan calls symbolic order). In psychanalitic theory, the *logos* is symbolically identified with the father figure. As Marianne Hirsch notes: «The child, coming to language, becomes subject to the name-of-the-father, accepting the exigencies of symbolizing desire in language and thereby transcending the mother's silence»<sup>140</sup>. On the other hand, the mother figure, connected to the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>136</sup> Adrienne Janus, «Listening: Jean-Luc Nancy and the "Anti-Ocular" Turn in Continental Philosophy and Critical Theory», art. cit., p. 196.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>137</sup> Ibid., p. 188.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>138</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, op.cit., p. 12.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>139</sup> Ibid., p. 12.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>140</sup> Marianne Hirsch, *The Mother-Daughter Plot*, Indiana University Press, Bloominghton, 1989, p. 168. The attribution of "masculine" traits to the logos and "feminine" traits to the bodily is not an innovation introduced by psychoanalysis.

corporeal, the vocal and the auditory: «remains absent even to herself. The place she inhabits is vacant. Although she produces and upholds the subject, she herself remains the matrix, the other, the origin»<sup>141</sup>.

Considering the female and the maternal as the (m)other of language, brings to the fore an important critical tension that also provides ample ground for a feminist perspective 142, a perspective we will briefly develop in

Instead, it is again a philosophical-cultural tradition that goes back to ancient Greece. On this topic see: Adriana Cavarero, *Corpo in figure. Filosofia e politica della corporeità*, Feltrinelli, Milano, 1995, p. 9.

<sup>141</sup> Marianne Hirsch, op. cit., p. 168. For a long and comprehensive discussion on this topic see: Sarah Hickmott, op. cit.

<sup>142</sup> Simone de Beauvoir's provocative declaration, «He is the Subject, he is the Absolute—she is the Other», signals the central importance of the self for twentieth century feminist thought. See: Id., The Second Sex, Vintage, London, 2010, p. 6. Since women have been cast as lower forms of the masculine individual, the dominant paradigm of the self in Western philosophy is derived from a masculine prototype. Feminists argue that the experiences of predominantly white and heterosexual, mostly economically advantaged men who held social, economic, and political power and dominated the arts, literature, media, and scholarship have been assumed to be universal and ideal. As a result, feminist thinkers argue that the definition of "subject" is not only a metaphisical philosophical topic, but also an ethical, epistemological, and political one. Before going into the details of the matter, I feel the need to make a premise. I do share here Gill Howie's perspective as explained in her *The future of philosophy*, in which she claims: «it is not incidental that within philosophy the concept of the "feminine" carries specific connotations [...and so] one must analyse the construction of the philosophic canon and consider philosophy a social practice» Gill Howie, «Feminist Philosophy» in: Oliver Leaman (ed.), The Future of Philosophy, p. 105. The perspective I adopt when I speak of "masculine" and "feminine" should not be considered a binary perspective on reality and gender discourse. Instead, the approach I seek to propose is that of a "materialist feminism", i.e., a philosophical feminism that considers gender categories to be socio-culturally constructed and not a natural and biologically fixed gender division. As noted by Marianne Hirsch: «The fact that theories arguing gender difference should emerge with such force and urgency during the 1970s is certainly not surprising. In the face of increasing threats of war and nuclear destruction, in both Europe and the United States, it might have seemed essential to imagine an alternative to what was perceived as masculine destructiveness. The feminine, of

the following paragraphs, highlighting some of the elements we will develop from a literary perspective in the next chapters. As Martin Jay has explored with reference to Luce Irigaray's lexicon, the ocularcentrism of Western philosophy is indissociably connected to both phallocratic and logocentric regimes: in short, Western philosophy is not merely ocularcentric but also phallogocularcentric 143.

course, presented only one of the many of many possible "others" who could provide an alternative, a way out of Western phallogocentrism, one possible deconstruction and reconstruction of the masculine rational, authorial subject. The space of "otherness" located in the feminine is the pre-oedipal space of motherdaughter mirroring, which comes to replace the rupture between self and world implied in the destructiveness of war. American feminism, then, creates a fantasy of cultural survival through the dissemination of traditionally feminine values into the public world (polis), on the one hand, and through a reconstruction of the masculine by means of greater involvement in the home (oikos), on the other. French feminism, operating in a poststructuralist context which has already challenged any notion of defined identity or ego and any unified transcendental subject, still views the notion of the "feminine" as the means by which to break out of phallogocentrism, through silence toward otherness. Whether based on the object-relations model of ego development or in the deconstructive vision of a split subject, psychoanalytic feminisms have engaged in a process of revision with global and visionary aspirations» Marianne Hirsch, op. cit, p. 135. For a further explanation of this aspect, see also Genevieve Lloyd, The Man of Reason "Male" and "Female" in Western Philosophy, Methuen, London, 1984.

Nine: «"Phallogocularcentrism": Derrida and Irigaray», pp. 493–544. On this aspect, Cavarero suggests some very interesting reflections. The philosopher recognises the importance that the sphere of language assumes in contemporary philosophical reflection, and particularly in feminist philosophy. It is precisely in language – the philosopher states – that the phallologocentric occindental vision is embodied: «Chiamato anche discorso o logos, a seconda dei registri stilistici prescelti, il linguaggio tende qui, non tanto a riassumere o a rispecchiare, bensì a coincidere con l'economia binaria. Esso è appunto il sistema fallologocentrico delle opposizioni. È l'ordine simbolico per eccellenza, il regno della sintassi del Padre. La sua forza consiste nel produrre significati disponendoli in una rete dominabile di concetti, ossia in una struttura che, non solo pretende per sé il marchio della razionalità e dell'intelligibilità, ma mette ogni nome nel posto che gli spetta e lo tiene sotto controllo. Lo stesso termine "soggetto" diventa così

Although it is true that «[t]he pleasure of the acoustic sphere, [is] symbolized since antiquity by female creatures, [and] sooner or later evokes the figure of the mother»<sup>144</sup>, it is Nietzsche the one who establishes the link

nient'altro che uno dei nomi più funzionali all'economia binaria di questa struttura, anzi, il termine principale della sua "vecchia" forma metafisica» [Also called discourse or logos, depending on the stylistic registers chosen, language tends here not so much to summarise or mirror, but to coincide with the binary system. It is precisely the phallologocentric system of oppositions. It is the symbolic order par excellence, the realm of the Father's syntax. Its strength lies in producing meanings by arranging them in a dominable network of concepts, that is, in a structure that not only claims for itself the mark of rationality and intelligibility, but also places each name in its rightful place and keeps it under control. The term "subject" itself thus becomes nothing more than one of the names most functional to the binary economy of this structure, indeed, the main term of its "old" metaphysical form] Adriana Cavarero, *Filosofie femministe*, op. cit., p. 94.

<sup>144</sup> Adriana Cavarero, For More than One Voice, op. cit., p. 132. In general, everything outside the "logos" is feminine: «Il regno del logos, la sintassi dicotomica del concetto, registrano infatti spesso l'oscura minaccia di qualcosa che è inconcettualizzabile, irrappresentabile e, perciò, impadroneggiabile. La chora di Platone, materia informe e inintelligibile a cui egli dà il nome di madre, e il "continente nero" con cui Freud indica il lato incomprensibile della psiche femminile, sono appunto significativi esempi di questa sfera eccedente e inquietante. C'è, insomma, un punto cieco della rappresentazione, un vuoto del discorso, una zona irriducibile alle forme del logos. E non è certo un caso che per l'immaginario filosofico essa prenda nomi femminili. Il sistema fallologocentrico ha dei margini minacciati. Qualcosa lo eccede, sta fuori del suo dominio. Detto altrimenti, il sistema è caratterizzato da un interno e da un esterno. L'interno corrisponde alla sfera dell'intelligibile dove regna l'economia binaria che mette in forma, concettualizza, rappresenta, genera i significati e li controlla. L'esterno corrisponde invece alla sfera oscura e inintelligibile di ciò che sfugge al lavoro della significazione e tuttavia prende nomi femminili: matrice, materia, madre» [In fact, the realm of the logos, the dichotomous syntax of the concept, often registers the obscure threat of something that is unconceptualisable, unrepresentable and, therefore, unconquerable. Plato's chora, the shapeless and unintelligible matter to which he gives the name of mother, and the "dark continent" with which Freud indicates the incomprehensible side of the female psyche, are precisely significant examples of this excess and disturbing sphere. There is, in short, a blind spot of representation, a gap in discourse, an area irreducible to the forms of the logos. And it is certainly no coincidence that for the philosophical imagination it takes on feminine names. The phallologocentric system has threatened margins. Something wbetween the maternal character of musical pleasure and the way in which it liberates the listener from the chains of individuality»<sup>145</sup>. In Nietzsche's steps, the interest on the auditory sphere developed by post-structuralist rethinking of the subject – aided by the category of the unconscious introduced by Freud's and Lacan's developments in psychoanalysis – causes a decisive fracture within the subject's monolithic self-conscious substance and challenges its rational foundation. In post-structuralist oto-centric thinking: «the pleasure rooted in the acoustic sphere has above all a subversive function; that is, it destabilizes language as a system that produces the subject»<sup>146</sup>.

As we saw, both Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, as well as Didier Anzieu develop an acoustic ontology through the figuring of a "natural" (or at least pre-symbolic) maternality<sup>147</sup>, in this acoustic perception's embodiment, they recall the originary scene of the fusional relationship

exceeds it, lies outside its domain. Put differently, the system is characterised by an inside and an outside. The inside corresponds to the sphere of the intelligible where the binary system dominates, which shapes, conceptualises, represents, generates meanings, and controls them. The outside, on the other hand, corresponds to the obscure and unintelligible sphere of that which escapes the work of signification and yet takes on feminine names: matrix, substance, mother] Adriana Cavarero, *Filosofie femministe*, op. cit., p. 101. An interesting insight into the concept of maternal as "other" is what Cavarero proposes in the paragraph «madre materia» in: Id. *Corpo in figure*, op. cit., pp. 91-101.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>145</sup> Adriana Cavarero, For More than One Voice, op. cit., p. 131.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>146</sup> Ibid., p. 132.

articulates an acoustic ontology rich in maternal metaphorisations. Adrienne Janus has considered À l'écoute, to be compatible with the kind of "otocentric" feminist genealogy that she finds in the anti-phallogocularcentric philosophy of Luce Irigaray. On this topic, see: Adrienne Janus, art. cit., p. 187. Discussions of the nature of voice often focus on the role of the maternal voice in the formation of the subject. Kaja Silverman, in her book *The Acoustic Mirror*, provides a comprehensive overview of work theorising voice, and the maternal voice in particular. On this topic see also Michelle Boulous Walker, *Philosophy and the Maternal Body. Reading Silence*, Routledge, London and New York, 1998.

between mother and child also «to frustrate the category of the individual»<sup>148</sup>.

The fact that Lacoue-Labarthe refers to the transition from the visual to the auditory as a move from "Narcissus to Echo" is no coincidence, since, as scholar Mary Noonan summarises in her volume *Echo's Voice*: "for psychoanalysis, the myth of Echo and Narcissus represents the primacy of the voice in subjective development and its feminine nature". Indeed, Didier Anzieu also locates an early metaphorisation of the imbrication of voice and gaze in the Greek myth of Echo and Narcissus:

The legend well indicates the precedence the sound mirror has over the visual mirror, as well as the primarily feminine nature of the voice and the connection between the emission of sound and the demand for love. But [...] if the mirror – whether sound or vision – gives back to the subject only his own reflection, that is to say his demand, his distress (Echo) or his quest for an ideal (Narcissus), the result is a defusing of the drives, freeing the death drives and giving them economic predominance over the life drives<sup>150</sup>

As pure voice, Echo represents a "vocalic relationality" prior to any codified language: «free from the pretences of Narcissus and from Ovid's textual games, Echo comes to appear as the divinity who teaches an acoustic relationality, still linked to infantile pleasure, in which uniqueness makes itself heard as voice»<sup>151</sup>. While maintaining acoustic perception as the main point of analysis, in the following paragraphs I will attempt to summarise

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>148</sup> Adriana Cavarero, For More than One Voice, op. cit., p. 131.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>149</sup> Mary Noonan, *Echo's Voice*, op. cit., p.1.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>150</sup> Didier Anzieu, op. cit., p. 186.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>151</sup> Adriana Cavarero, For More than One Voice, op. cit., p. 172.

some of the features contained in the texts of three post-structuralist philosophers who, referring to psychoanalytic theories and paying great attention to the theme of language in a deconstructionist fashion, re-think the subject precisely from the acoustic mirror of the mother's voice. These are the three best-known exponents of French feminism in the 1970s on an international level: Luce Irigaray, Hélène Cixous and Julia Kristeva<sup>152</sup>. Although they each elaborate an original thought that cannot be assimilated to that of the other two, all three come from the *Psy-et-Po* (Psychanalyse et Politique) group and show considerable interest in the problems of language, also following the appearance of Jacques Derrida's most important writings from 1967 onwards. Furthermore, Irigaray and Kristeva, both students of Jacques Lacan, criticise and recontextualise his thought.

## 1.3.1 Luce Irigaray

Luce Irigaray's reflections, moving between philosophy and psychoanalysis, touch on many of the themes I have addressed so far. In *Speculum* (1974), Irigaray proposes a a theory of sexual difference through a critical analysis of both Freud and Lacan and the entire Western philosophical tradition. According to Irigaray, psychoanalysis, like philosophy, engages in logophallocentric reasoning. As well summarised by Margareth Witford in her introduction to the *Irigaray Reader*, Irigaray's critique to psychoanalysys is based on three main points:

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>152</sup> For further information on this, see: Marianne Hirsch, *Mothers and Daughters*, op. cit. and Shirley Nelson Garner (et. al), *The (M)other tongue: essays in feminist psychoanalytic interpretation*, Cornell University Press, New York, 1985.

Firstly, psychoanalysis is unaware of the historical and philosophical determinants of its own discourse. Secondly, psychoanalysis is itself governed by unconscious fantasies which it has not been able to analyse. Thirdly, it is patriarchal; it reflects a social order which does not acknowledge what it owes to the mother. As a consequence of these factors, its phallocentric bias is taken for universal truth; psychoanalysis is blind to its own assumptions. [...] her difference is assumed under male parameters. Irigaray is also critical of the way in which psychoanalys is transmitted – from father to son – with a premium on identification with the father and devotion to his law<sup>153</sup>

Already the title chosen by Irigaray, *Speculum*, is an indirect attack on Lacan and his theory of the "stade du miroir," in which Lacan identifies the mirror experience as central and decisive in childhood, that is, the one in which the child sees reflected in the mirror for the first time and begins to acquire and construct the "sense" of its identity. The mirror stage, which was briefly explained in the previous paragraphs, slightly anticipates the entry into the "symbolic realm". The child's entry into the Symbolic Realm, coincides, in Lacanian theory, with the acquisition of language and, consequently, with the overcoming of the Oedipus complex:

The child enters this realm once s/he becomes aware of the father as a third party in his/her relationship with his/her mother. According to Freud's theory, in the child's desire to be with the mother and to be reunited with her in symbiotic unity, the child wishes to usurp the father's

 $<sup>^{153}</sup>$  Margaret Whitford (ed.), *The Irigaray Reader*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1991, p. 6.

position and as a result fears castration by him. The child, on learning language, gains unconscious awareness of the fact that a sign only has meaning through its difference from other signs and that it also represents the absence of the object indicated by the sign. Just as the child is learning this about language, s/he also gains awareness that familial relationships are structured in the same way. S/he must enter into a world of sexual difference and experience the lack of that which s/he most desires—union with the mother. Lacan develops Freud's theory by indicating that the child cannot literally desire to adopt the father's position since this would entail incestuous relations with the mother. The father instead represents an unobtainable ideal also known as the Name-ofthe-Father. It is the imposition of this law onto the unbridled sexual desires of the Real which forms the basis for culture and the symbolic. Similarly, the desire for the mother represents a desire for lost unity rather than an actual sexual desire for the mother. [...] [B]y disrupting the unity of mother and child, the father not only allows the child the possibility of its own identity through identifying with the father, but also enables the child to take up a subject position within language through awareness of absence (the absent  $mother)^{154}$ 

Irigaray criticises this system for assuming identity in an essentially masculine language: «within this system, the only feminine identity available to women is that of "defective" or "castrated" men; women are not

<sup>154</sup> The short but comprehensive explanation is from Helen O' Sullivan's paper «Father Tongue and Mother Tongue – Elias Canetti», *Journal of Postgraduate Research*, n. 5, 2006, pp. 130-143, pp. 131-132.

symbolically self-defined»<sup>155</sup>. The masculine imaginary built around this idea does not consider the role of the mother in the formation of the individual, therefore, Irigaray states: «All of western culture rests on the murder of the mother»<sup>156</sup>. According to Irigaray, the maternal womb is a condition in which «the child was whole, the mother whole»<sup>157</sup>. This prenatal condition, in which the mother plays a fundamental role, is considered a taboo for psychoanalysis. Irigaray states:

Putting the matrix of his language [langue] in its place? But the exclusivity of his law forecloses this first body, this first home, this first love. It sacrifices them so as make them material for the rule of a language [langue] which privileges the masculine genre [le genre masculin] to such an extent as to confuse it with the human race [le genre humain]. [...] The social order, our culture, psychoanalysis itself, wants it it his way: the mother must remain forbidden, excluded 158

Irigaray believes that in logophallocentrism, the mother is recognised as the physical generator of the individual, while «the Father [...] superimposes upon the archaic world of the flesh a universe of language

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>155</sup> Margaret Whitford, op. cit., p. 4.

Whitford, p. 7. By Mother Irigaray does not necessarily mean the mother in the biological sense, but she means the matrix of creation in a feminine sense: «It is also necessary for us to discover and assert that we are always mothers once we are women. We bring something other than children into the world, we engender something other than children: love, desire, language, art, the social, the political, the religious, for example. But this creation has been forbidden us for centuries, and we must reappropriate this maternal dimension that belongs to us as women» Ibid., p. 43.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>157</sup> Ibid., p. 39.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>158</sup> Luce Irigaray, op. cit., p. 39.

(langue) and symbols. [...] The fertility of the earth is sacrificed to delineate the cultural horizon of the father tongue [langue] (wrongly termed the mother tongue)»<sup>159</sup>. As a result, the father defines the symbolic system through language. The mother, on the other hand, represents what is not part of the symbolic system, which is why, when given a voice, the paternal system of speech loses its stability<sup>160</sup>. Irigaray's linguistic deconstruction, while necessarily moving within the given language, disrupts and reassembles its categories into unexpected meanings that shift the paternal discourse towards a feminine symbolic order that is neither specular nor simply adaptive to the masculine one. According to Irigaray, language, philosophy, and psychoanalysis are not "neutral," but rather all bearers of phallocentric discourse.

The task of feminist criticism is thus to create "another" language, one with different values, one that is not falsely neutral but specifically feminine. In this regard, Irigaray proposes a type of language that is embodied, emotional and not subject to the law of the father:

We must not once more kill the mother who was sacrificed to the origins of our culture. We must give her new life, new life to that mother, to our mother within us and between us. We must refuse to let her desire be annihilated by the law of the father. We must give her the right to pleasure, to jouissance, to passion, restore her right to speech, and sometimes to cries and anger. We must also find, find anew, invent the words, the sentences that speak the most archaic and

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>159</sup> Ibid., p. 41.

<sup>&</sup>quot;dark continent" *par excellence*. It remains in the shadows of our culture; it is its night and its hell [...] The maternal function underpins the social order» Ibid., p. 35.

most contemporary relationship with the body of the mother, with our bodies, the sentences that translate the bond between her body, ours, and that of our daughters. We have to discover a language [langage] which does not replace the bodily encounter, as paternal language [langue] attempts to do, but which can go along with it, words which do not bar the corporeal, but which speak corporeally<sup>161</sup>

In the context of exploring the ambivalence of the origin of writing, Irigaray's linguistic theory with its acoustic-vocal component is particularly relevant. Irigaray posits that there exists a space in-between the logos and the body, which she terms as the space of the voice. The voice happens in this in-between space. The maternal model of sharing, which exists in this space, is forgotten and becomes assimilated or appropriated by the subject as part of themselves when transitioning from the grounding of the sonorous space of the voice to voice as support for language. According to Irigaray, the voice represents the presence of the other as other within the self, but this presence is buried deeply under the weight of language, which is based on a division of self and other. Thus, the forgotten female part of philosophy can only be expressed through the voice. As a nucleus of indeterminacy and intermediality, voice, oscillating in the in-between space of body and language, becomes the ideal vehicle for exploring the ambivalence of the origin of writing:

Woman never speaks the same way. What she emits is fluent, fluctuating. *Blurring*. And she is not listened to, unless proper meaning (meaning of the proper) is lost. Whence the resistances to that voice that overflows the "subject". Which

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>161</sup> Luce Irigaray, op. cit., p. 43.

the "subject" then congeals, freezes, in its categories until it paralyzes the voice in its flow<sup>162</sup>

Voice emerges as an image for a sharing that is not halving or separation or division, but exchange, movement between. In Irigaray's theory, a "parler-femme" appears, modelled on the mother-child relationship, a viscous, fluid language in which there are no longer any boundaries between the intelligible and the sensible.

### 1.3.2 Julia Kristeva

Within her comprehensive work *La révolution du langage poétique* (1974), Kristeva explores two distinct types of signifying processes, based on the Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalytical perspective. The first is the symbolic process, which corresponds to the oedipal phase, and refers to the establishment of sign and syntax, as well as the paternal function. This process is characterized by the imposition of grammatical and social constraints, which constitute the symbolic law. The second type of process that Kristeva identifies is a pre-oedipal semiotic order, which is defined by sound and rhythm. The process is «indifferent to language, enigmatic and feminine, this space underlying the written is rhythmic, unfettered, irreducible to its intelligible verbal translation; musical»<sup>163</sup>. This pulsional substratum that exceeds and at the same time is part of language, this phonetic and archaic dimension of language is traced back by Kristeva to the Platonic "chora"<sup>164</sup>. The chora refers to a preverbal and unconscious

<sup>162</sup> Luce Irigaray, «The "Mechanics" of Fluids», in: Id., *This Sex Which Is Not One*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, New York, 1985, p. 112.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>163</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in poetic language*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1984, p. 29.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>164</sup> Adriana Cavarero accurately summarises the main characteristics of the Platonic chora: «The term *chora* is explicitly stolen by Kristeva from Plato's

sphere where the rhythmic and vocal impulse prevails. In her formulation of the chora, Kristeva associates it with both the mother and the subject's prehistory, referring to the primordial role played by the mother's voice, as well as the psychic and libidinal conditions of early infantile life. Deeply rooted in the body and linked to the indistinct oneness of mother and child, the chora precedes the symbolic system of language. In Kristeva's theorisation, the chora extends its function well beyond the infantile scene; as Claire Kahane notes in her article *Questioning the Maternal Voice*:

Kristeva theorizes a presence beyond, before the symbolic that is linked to the real elswhere and, moreover, to a biological real that materially supports representation. In the uncoscious is the lost trace of an archaic experience of the

Timaeus. In the cosmological context of the Timaeus, Plato speaks of a great maker or builder who shapes the world. For this work of molding, three elements are needed. The first is the divine model that the builder looks at, which is composed of eternal and immaterial forms or ideas that pertain to the sphere of thought and thus correspond to the videocentric order of signifiers. The second element is the physical world in which we live, and which is the material copy—visible to the eyes of the body—of the divine model. The third element, rather more problematic, is the *chora*: a sort of unformed material that gets used in the shaping of the world. Plato compares these elements, respectively, to the Father, the Son, and the Mother. Even more interesting, from Kristeva's point of view, is the fact that the philosopher finds himself in some difficulty when it comes to naming and defining the chora. Because the whole sphere of noetic intelligibility is reserved for the ideas that appertain to the realm of the Father, and the whole sphere of material visibility is reserved for the realm of the Son, the *chora* in fact gets situated at once outside intelligibility and outside visibility. The chora is neither intelligible nor visible; it cannot be contemplated by the eyes of the soul, nor observed by the eyes of the body. Deprived of every material and conceptual form, it is the unformed maternal receptacle in which the Father generates the Son as his copy through the imprint of his forms. It is the amorphous receptacle, the space of materialization, the wet nurse» For More than One Voice, pp. 134-135. For an in-depht discussion on Kristeva's chora, see: Paul Allen Miller, «Revolution in Platonic Language: The Chora in Kristeva», in: Id., Diotima and the Barricades: French Feminists Read Plato, Oxford Universey Press, Oxford, 2015, pp. 112-163.

body before language, an experience of a sensuous continuum to which mothers and artists have privileged access<sup>165</sup>

Kristeva – as had happened to Irigaray in her theorisation of a feminine language – finds herself having to define through language an essentially extra-conceptual, extralinguistic concept. Thus, the paradox: how to express an essentially extra-symbolic concept through the symbolic?<sup>166</sup>

<sup>165</sup> Claire Kahane, «Questioning the Maternal Voice», *Genders*, n. 3, 1988, pp. 82-91, p. 83.

<sup>166</sup> Adriana Cavarero investigates this topic in depth identifying rhytm and laugh as key elements to re-think language from a non-symbolic perspective. She states: «Un'accezione del femminile in termini di materialità inconscia, irriducibilità, scatenamento, eccedenza si inscrive infatti perfettamente nella classica economia binaria che vi contrappone, specularmente, un'accezione del maschile in termini di intelligibilità, coscienza, ordine, forma. La strategia del femminismo contemporaneo francese è dunque costretta a muoversi su questo punto con grande cautela per non ricadere nelle trappole del discorso. La mossa decisiva consiste proprio in un ripensamento del materno che sottolinea il legame di desiderio e di piacere piuttosto che la funzione sociale procreativa, a cui consegue un'invasione dei territori patriarcali per eccellenza – il testo, la scrittura – che libera il linguaggio dal primato del senso, aprendolo al movimento non intenzionale del ritmo e del riso, alle variazioni tonali finalmente affrancate dal dominio del significato. Il ritmo e il riso vengono a sconvolgere l'intelligibilità del senso in quanto scopo primario del linguaggio fallologocratico, che vuole comprendere e padroneggiare ciò che dice. Se, nella lingua, cade il primato del senso, cade anche il regno del Padre» [An understanding of femininity in terms of unconscious materiality, irreducibility, unleashing, and excess fits perfectly into the classical binary economy that opposes it, mirror-wise, to an understanding of masculinity in terms of intelligibility, consciousness, order, and form. The strategy of contemporary French feminism is therefore forced to move on this point with great caution in order not to fall into the traps of discourse. The decisive move consists precisely in a rethinking of the maternal that emphasizes the bond of desire and pleasure rather than the procreative social function, which leads to an invasion of the patriarchal territories par excellence – the text, the writing – that frees language from the primacy of meaning, opening it to the non-intentional movement of rhythm and laughter, to tonal variations finally emancipated from the dominion

As is obvious, Kristeva knows that to speak of the preverbal means to reduce it to the verbal and to reconfigure the heterogeneous in the homogeneous. She knows that, when she speaks of the chora [...] she is conceptualizing what exceeds the concept. But she neither doubts the existence of bodies nor postulates that the process of signification is an operation that is played out exclusively in the realm of the symbolic. Language has, precisely, a materiality that is rooted in the drives of the unconscious, a materiality of which language bears the traces. The eroticization of the vocal apparatus—although blocked in the phonematic code of language— makes its presence felt in the combinatorial play of tones, sounds, repetitions, and rhythms. This is evident in the poetic text, but it also operates in ordinary speech; the work of the chora always permeates the sphere of language. The age-old problem of the sayability of the preverbal thus finds a solution: one can speak of the semiotic chora because one can retrace its effects in language — including the language that says this chora — including the theoretical treatment that Kristeva provides<sup>167</sup>

As Cavarero succinctly but thoroughly explains, Kristeva theorises a chora that does not exceed language but is an integral part of it. The semiotic impulses of the phonic find some way to invade language through rhythm and musicality. Therefore, the process also invades writing and in particular the literary text. As was the case for Lacoue-Labarthe in *The Echo* 

of meaning. Rhythm and laughter disrupt the intelligibility of meaning as the primary purpose of phallocratic language, which seeks to understand and master what it says. If the primacy of meaning falls in language, so does the realm of the Father] Adriana Cavarero, *Filosofie femministe*, op. cit., p. 105.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>167</sup> Adriana Cavarero, For More than One Voice, p. 136.

of the Subject, a rhythmic construction of the self that is shaped through style also returns in Kristeva's theories. In this perspective, the poet's ear is the one that best perceives and transmits the chora, since, as Cavarero notes:

As the material of an originary acoustic pleasure, the voice precedes and makes possible a language that always bears its traces. Both generating and destabilizing, the semiotic vocalic is therefore – at the same time – the precondition of the semantic function and its uncontrollable excess. When this difficult control openly surrenders to the reemergence of vocalic pleasure, we have the poetic text. Thus, the poet simply indulges an ancient pleasure and resurrects the rhythmic waves whose undulation makes language move<sup>168</sup>

### 1.3.3 Hélène Cixous

In some of Cixous' essays – in particular *Sorties* and *Le rire de la Méduse* – her theories tie in with Irigaray's thinking. Like Irigaray, Cixous also emphasises how the Western philosophical logocentric tradition is also a phallocentrism and shares the idea that it is necessary to find a new language that undermines the foundations of phallologocentrism. Within the binary framework of logophallocentric reality, one of the main oppositions that Cixous focuses on is the dichotomy between speech and writing. Refuting this binary opposition, Cixous envisions a type of writing that embodies the vocalic element of language. Similarly to Kristeva, Cixous imagines a transitional space between body and language, the space of a *chant d'avant la loi* [song before the Law (of the Father)]. For Cixous, only in reverberation and vocal rhythm is it possible for the subject to find a pre-

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>168</sup> Adriana Cavarero, op. cit., p. 138.

symbolic unity, since: «The Voice sings from a time before law, before the Symbolic took one's breath away and reappropriated it into language under its authority of separation»<sup>169</sup>. The vocalic, the rhythmic, all those asemantic elements of language, once again lead back to childhood enjoyment. Cixous language is a *languelait*<sup>170</sup>, a feminine, embodied language:

There is a language that I speak or that speaks (to) me in all tongues. A language at once unique and universal that resounds in each national tongue when a poet speaks it. In each tongue, there flows milk and honey. And this language I know, I don't need to enter it; it flows, it is the milk of love, the honey of my unconscious. The language that women speak when there is no one there to correct them<sup>171</sup>

Also in Cixous theories, voice, a site of movement beyond any fixed category, is embodied in the maternal. In contrast to Irigaray – who focused on a feminine that is *outside* the metaphysical system – Cixous and Kristeva use the maternal as an element *prior* to language.

Both Kristeva and Cixous focus on a primary realm of experience that is linked to the original relationship with the mother, which precedes the advent of language as a system of meanings and eludes the symbolic codes of its binary economy. This is a place of a maternal word that is voice and song rather than concept, of the unconscious rather than consciousness, and is the source of the seductive cadences that resonate in poetic verse. It is the rhythmic texture of the text that fluidizes its

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>169</sup> Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément, *The Newly Born Woman*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1986, p. 65.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>170</sup> See: Hélène Cixous, *Entre l'écriture*, Des femmes, Paris, 1986, p. 32.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>171</sup> Hélène Cixous, *Coming to Writing and Other Essays*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge Massachussets, 1991, p. 121.

conceptual forms and brings out the connection between body and writing. It is the musicality of language that exceeds the discourse system and its will for meaning, as the desire to capture the world in a network of meanings and dominate it. The maternal source of this language is based on the gratuitous gift of spontaneous generosity, which is precisely rhythmic, sweet, and fluid, like the milk of the mother that the infant drinks in rhythmic and endless sucks, as Cixous suggests. Wrapped in an original sound material that has its own rhythms, body music, voice, and desire thus lie at the roots of a feminine language that phallocentric order comes to harness in its concepts and drown in its prose<sup>172</sup>

Cixous' concept of language is thus one that precedes but also exceeds the syntax of phallologocentric discourse and is transmitted – in addition to the vocalic – through writing. Feminine writing in Cixous is mainly based on auditory imagination:

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>172</sup> «Sia Kristeva che Cixous focalizzano infatti un ambito di esperienza primaria, legato al rapporto originario con la madre, che precede l'avvento del linguaggio in quanto sistema di significati e sfugge ai codici simbolici della sua economia binaria. Luogo di una parola materna che è voce e canto piuttosto che concetto, dell'inconscio piuttosto che della coscienza, esso è fonte delle cadenze seduttive che risuonano nel verso poetico. È la tessitura ritmica del testo che ne fluidifica le forme concettuali e fa emergere il legame fra corpo e scrittura. È la musicalità della lingua che eccede il sistema del discorso e la sua volontà di senso in quanto volontà di catturare il mondo in una rete di significati e dominarlo. La sorgente materna di questa lingua si fonda sul dono gratuito di una generosità spontanea che è appunto ritmata, dolce, fluida: come il latte della madre che l'infante beve in suzioni ritmiche e infinite, suggerisce Cixous. Avvolte in un materiale sonoro originario che ha cadenze proprie, musica del corpo, voce e desiderio stanno così alle radici di una lingua femminile che l'ordine fallologocentrico viene a imbrigliare nei suoi concetti e ad affogare nella sua prosa» Adriana Cavarero, Filosofie femministe, op. cit. p. 104.

I sense femininity in writing by a privilege of voice: writing and voice are entwined and interwoven and writing's continuity/voice's rhythm take each other's breath away through interchanging, make the text gasp or form it out of suspense and silences, make it lose its voice or rend it with cries<sup>173</sup>

It is clear, therefore, that in Cixous's vision, feminine writing is not to be considered a style, but a predilection for music, for rhythm, for corporeity, for all that imagery that is philosophically traced back to the figure of the mother. Summarising, as Mary Noonan very well explains:

Maternal voice is an image for the writing process itself, for a feminine practice of writing — and ultimately of reading — that would sustain permanent movement between body and text, voice and metaphor. Thus, while it is undeniable that the maternal voice has been fantasised within culture, and that the work of feminist theorists on this theme may be read as furthering the utopian fantasy of a space of plenitude beyond the strictures of the symbolic, I would like to suggest that the work of theorists such as Irigaray, Kristeva

Newly Born Woman, op. cit., p. 92. As Cavarero notes: «L'écriture feminine is a fluid, overwhelmingly rhythmic writing, which breaks the rules of the symbolic, making syntax explode. It precedes and exceeds the codes that govern the phallocentric logos. Like the "writing from hearing to hearing" that the Spanish philosopher Maria Zambrano also evokes when she speaks of the "remote song" that comes from a maternal, vocalic source, l'écriture feminine maintains the vocal rhythm of the languelait. [...] Akin to song, this writing "plays its own score on our own body" and turns the text into music. [...] The result is the proliferation of a sense that does not coincide with the phallogocentric dominion of the signified, but rather flows from the movement that combines words according to the laws of rhythm, echo, and resonance» Adriana Cavarero, For More than One Voice, op. cit., p. 141.

and Cixous on the image of the maternal voice is part of an ongoing quest for new ways of configuring knowledge from a "feminine" perspective. The maternal voice is ultimately an image for the possibility of articulating the "entre-deux inarticulé" [the unarticulated/inarticulate in-between]<sup>174</sup>

Apart from being connected to the auditory dimension, Cixous's, Kristeva's and Irigaray's theories all refer to the poststructuralistic deconstruction of the subject. For the three philosophers, the acoustic pleasure coincides with the register of the unconscious, «therefore, there is no self-conscious "subject" here, no ego that could be linked to a cogito. The unity of the "I"—along with any other cultural or social system, including language—gets broken down precisely by the unconscious drive that blurs this "I's" boundaries»<sup>175</sup>. This aspect, like the others outlined so far, finally makes us understand the power and subversive, antimetaphysical role of the acoustic sphere, which disorganises the system built on linguistic signification. In its movement of unconscious pulsions, the sonorous disrupts the subject, letting a «a multiple "I" with many voices to emerge, in the register of the unconscious»<sup>176</sup>.

In conclusion to this first chapter, it will be worth recalling that – in the wake of Derrida's thought – the philosophical focus shifts from the visual to the acoustic and, at the same time, from the self-founded subject to a theoretical elaboration of a personal identity constituted by a play of relationships that make it fluid, resonant, and dynamic.

The identity of the self is thus neither an effect of discourse nor a self-founded substance. It is rather an exposed and external identity that

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>174</sup> Mary Noonan, op. cit., pp. 17-18.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>175</sup> Adriana Cavarero, For More than one voice, op. cit., p. 142.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>176</sup> Ibid., p. 143.

entrusts its desire for meaning to the gaze, gestures, and words of others. Unlike Narcissus and the Cartesian subject, this relational self does not see itself, but rather allows itself to be seen and, above all, heard. As Cavarero notes, it is precisely this condition that leads to a desire for self-narrative:

The feminist practice of self-awareness finds further explanation in the sense of self entrusted to storytelling, as well as in the general female passion for the everyday narration of lives and stories. Whether literary or not, written or oral, every story reveals who its protagonist is. In other words, the exposed and relational self is also a narratable self, which expresses its desire for meaning by entrusting it to the account of its own story. This is not only attested by feminist practices, but also by the narrative exchanges that characterize all crucial scenes of relationships, such as those with mothers, friends, and lovers. Banished from the realm of philosophy, the uncontrollable existence of the self and its desire for meaning have always found their place in the domain of storytelling<sup>177</sup>

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>177</sup> «Trova così un'ulteriore spiegazione quel senso del sé, affidato al racconto, che caratterizza la pratica femminista dell'autocoscienza. E, più in generale, si giustifica anche la nota passione femminile per la quotidiana narrazione di vite e di storie. Letteraria o meno, scritta o orale, ogni storia dice infatti chi è la sua protagonista. Detto altrimenti, il sé esposto e relazionale è anche un sé narrabile, che manifesta il suo desiderio di senso affidandolo al racconto della propria storia. Oltre che dalle pratiche femministe, ciò è del resto attestato dagli scambi narrativi che caratterizzano tutte le scene cruciali della relazione: quella della madre, delle amicizie e dell'amore. Cacciati dal regno della filosofia, l'esistenza impadroneggiabile del sé e il suo desiderio di senso trovano da sempre il loro spazio nell'ambito della narrazione» Adriana Cavarero, *Filosofie femministe*, op. cit., p. 114.

### 2. WRITING BY EAR

### 2.1. From autos to oto

The aim of this chapter, "writing by ear" is to shift from a purely philosophical perspective on auditory memory to a literary one<sup>178</sup>. As I briefly mentioned in the previous paragraph, auditory perception is an activity that challenges Western philosophical tradition, a thinking in which the ear is subverted to the eye, and sound subservient to rationality and argument. As noted by Sound Art scholar Salomé Voegelin, the question of how to write about listening may thus necessitate a complete reorganization of our language, argument, and inquiry. The challenge of such reordering, she suggests, is one that philosophy, by virtue of its essentially discursive methods, may not yet be prepared to face. However, as Jean-Luc Nancy<sup>179</sup>

Writing by Ear. Clarice Lispector and the Aural Novel (University of Toronto Press, Toronto). As the author explains, the title she chose as a complex but interesting meaning, whose perspective I share. She states: «In this expression, "I write by ear," which is akin to a self-discovery, Clarice Lispector opens the doors to a world that is still little explored in the printed literary universe: the study of the auditory and acoustic properties of writing, present not only at the moment of fictional creation, when the writer "hears" voices and inscribes them, but also during silent reading, when an imaginary world is awakened by the vibrations of the words' sounds and images. Taking the expression "writing by ear" literally and unfolding the web of its musical and auditory metaphors, the aim is to describe the form it takes in fictional prose. The doubly implied metaphors, "playing by ear" and "learning by ear," suggest that "writing by ear" functions as an allegory (a metaphor of the third degree) for the production and interpretation of fictional texts based on musical acoustic non-writing practices» p. 30.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>179</sup> See: par. 1.2.3

implies and as Angela Leighton suggests: «[i]t might be, then, that the challenge belongs to literature and to literary-critic discourse» 180.

According to Merleau-Ponty, the work of art, by its very nature, «contient mieux que des idées, des matrices d'idées [...]»<sup>181</sup>. A similar point of view is shared by Maurice Blanchot, who affirms: «dans une œuvre littéraire, on [peut] exprimer des pensées aussi difficiles et d'une forme aussi abstraite que dans un ouvrage philosophique, mais à condition qu'elles ne soient *pas encore* pensées. Ce "pas encore" est la literature même, un "pas encore" qui, comme tel, est accomplissement et perfection»<sup>182</sup>. Both philosophers believe that in the artistic realm, existential understanding is not (yet) conceptualised; artistic expression is often engaged not with the verbal, but with pre-verbal meanings of the world, meanings that are embodied and lived rather than intellectually understood.

The goal of this section is to test these assertions and determine whether literature has addressed the dimension of listening – without necessarily conceptualising it – and, if so, how. I address the issue in three stages: First, using theories developed by scholar Plínio Walder Prado Jr, I retrace some key moments in autobiographical writing to determine whether and how we can discuss the relationship between acoustic perception and self-narrative. Second, I place emphasis on the historical period under consideration, i.e., the second half of the twentieth century. Lastly, I attempt

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>180</sup> Angela Leighton, *Hearing Things. The Work of Sound in Literature*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 2018, Ebook.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>181</sup> [(the work of art) contains more than ideas, matrices of ideas] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *La prose du monde*, Paris, Gallimard, 1969, p. 126-127.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>182</sup> [In a literary work, one [can] express thoughts as difficult and as abstract in form as in a philosophical work, but on condition that they are not yet thought. This "not yet" is literature itself, a "not yet" which, as such, is fulfilment and perfection] Maurice Blanchot, *Le Livre à venir*, Paris, Gallimard, 1959, p. 204.

to present a phenomenology of oto-biography, i.e., a list of elements linking acoustic perception to self-writing.

As I mentioned, the title of this thesis is not only an homage to Derrida, but it also takes up the most direct definition of "autobiography" as imagined by the scholar who – together with Philippe Lejeune and frequently disagreeing with him<sup>183</sup> – sought a theory to describe the autobiographical genre: Georges Gusdorf. Gusdorf defines autobiography in a rather systemic way, through a three-dimensional definition: auto-biography. Autobiography would thus be the synthesis of this threefold conceptual dimension<sup>184</sup>. In Gusborf's definition, the "autos" is the identity, the self-aware subject whose self-consciousness comes only after a long time after being born. The "bios" is the organic existence of the "autos" which overflows the capacity of the present consciousness (the autos). The "graphein" introduces the technical means proper to the writings of the self; writing is the fruit of a late apprenticeship since the complete handling of this technique and the mastery of writing are long to acquire<sup>185</sup>.

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>183</sup> For an overview of the "querelle" between Lejeune and Gusdorf see: Martina Wagner-Egelhaaf *Handbook of Autobiography/Autofiction*, De Gryter, Berlin, 2019; D'Intino, Franco *L'autobiografia moderna. Storia, forme, problemi*, Bulzoni, Roma, 1998; Gennaro Schiano, *Paradigmi autobiografici. Ramon Gomez de la Serna, Christopher Isherwood, Michel Leiris, Alberto Savinio*, Pacini Editore, Pisa, 2015.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>184</sup> See: Georges Gusdorf, *Auto-bio-graphies. Lignes de vie 2*, Odile Jacob, Paris, 1990, p. 10-11.

<sup>185</sup> In the words of the author: «Le mot Auto-Bio-Graphie est un villain mot, artificiellement médical, un mot sans âme, déprovu de vibration historique et d'enchantement poétique, ce qu'il faut pour les professionnels de la critique dite littéraire. Mais ce mot antipathique a le mérite au moins de dire ce qu'il dit, avec une rare précision. Autos, c'est l'identité, le moi conscient de lui-même et principe d'une existence autonome; Bios affirme la continuité vitale de cette identité, son déploiement historique, variations sur le thème fondamental. Entre l'Autos et le Bios, le dialogue est celui de l'Un et du Multiple, dialectique de l'expression, fidelité et écarts au cœur de l'existence quotidienne, dont l'individualité forme

Gusdorf identifies two cultural conditions necessary for the creation of an autobiography<sup>186</sup>: according to Gusdorf, the Copernican Revolution

l'enjeu, hasardé de jour en jour au long des fortunes et infortunes de la vie. La Graphie, enfin, introduit le moyen technique propres aux écritures du moi. La vie personnelle simplement vécue, Bios d'un Autos, bénéficie d'une nouvelle naissance par la médiation de la Graphie» [The word Auto-Bio-Graphy is a nasty word, artificially medical, a soulless word, devoid of historical vibration and poetic enchantment, just what the professionals of so-called literary criticism need. But this unsympathetic word at least has the merit of saying what it says, with a rare precision. Autos is identity, the self aware of itself and the principle of an autonomous existence; Bios affirms the vital continuity of this identity, its historical deployment, variations on the fundamental theme. Between Autos and Bios, the dialogue is that of the One and the Multiple, dialectics of expression, fidelity, and deviations at the heart of daily existence, where individuality forms the stake, hazarded from day to day along the fortunes and misfortunes of life. Finally, Graphie introduces the technical means of writing the self. The simply lived personal life, Bios of an Autos, benefits from a new birth through the mediation of the Graphie] Georges Gusdorf, Auto-Bio-Graphie, op. cit., p. 10. This apparently easy act is anything but simple, for the writer becomes, in the act of writing, both the observing subject and the object of investigation, remembrance, and contemplation. As simple and immediate as it is, this definition cannot be defined untrue. However, as we will try to illustrate in the following sections, the three-word string correspond to the problems posed by such a complex literary genre: the impossibility for the subject to know themselves, the ungraspability of life through memory and finally the deceit associated with writing, which falsifies experience by translating it into language. For an overview on the problems of the definition see: Maria Anna Mariani, Sull'autobiografia contemporanea. Nathalie Sarraute, Elias Canetti, Alice Munro, Primo Levi, Carocci, Roma, 2012.

debated and has seen numerous hypotheses arise on the sources, models, and foundational texts. For the various hypotheses on the origins of the autobiographical genre, see Nora Catelli, *El espacio autobiográfico*, Editorial Lumen, Barcelona, 1991; Georges May, *L'autobiographie*, Presses Universitaires de France, Paris, 1979; Francesco Orlando, *Infanzia, memoria e storia da Rousseau ai romantici*, Pacini, Pisa, 2007; James Goodwin, *Autobiography. The SelfMade Text.* Twayne Publishers, New York, 1993; Lawrence Kappel (ed.), *Autobiography*, Greenhaven Press, San Diego, 2001, 1-33; Robert Elbaz, *The Changing Nature of the Self*, University of Iowa Press, Iowa City, 1987; Iann Burkitt, «The shifting concept of the self», *History of the Human Sciences*, Vol. 7, n.2, May 1994, 7-28.

and the spiritual revolution are two important metaphysical preconditions for the emergence of the autobiographical genre. Following these two major shifts, the individual focused on his desire for self-knowledge and began to regard themselves as an object of investigation<sup>187</sup>. Self-knowledge at the beginning of the Christian era was based on self-examination through a *spiritual dialogue* between the soul and God. In this sense, self-writing already takes the form of an interior listening (turned towards the subject itself) and turned towards the other (God).

# 2.2. Listening and self-narrative

As I briefly mentioned referring to Roland Barthes' *Listening*, auditory perception's development cannot be described without considering both a theoretical and an historical/cultural point of view. On the connection between acoustic perception and the development of the Christian religion, Barthes states:

To listen is the evangelical verb par excellence: listening to the divine word is what faith amounts to, for it is by such listening that man is linked to God [...]. But also, listening is taking soundings. As soon as religion is internalized, what is plumbed by listening is intimacy, the heart's secret: Sin. A history and a phenomenology of interiority [...] should here join a history and a phenomenology of listening. For at the very heart of a civilization of Sin [...], interiority has developed steadily. What the first Christians listen to are still exterior voices,

93

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>187</sup> On this aspect see Georges Gusdorf's essay: *Conditions and Limits of Autobiography*, p. 31 [online].

those of demons or angels; it is only gradually that the object of listening is internalized to the point becoming pure conscience<sup>188</sup>

Writing, according to this "internalised listening" viewpoint, takes the form of a double movement in which the subject simultaneously listens to themselves and to the other: «lorsque je lis j'écris en moi-même, et lorsque j'écris (pour moi-même ou pour quelqu'un d'autre), je lis en moi même» 189.

Let us take the Augustinian model of self-narrative as confession as analysed by Denis Viennet. In the *Confessions*, Augustine, through his writing, dedicates his thoughts and recounts his journey to an Other, the one he calls God. In investigating this dimension, Denis Viennet states:

In this introspective process, the act of listening to a voice that is heard within oneself, both foreign and intimate at the same time, is at play. For the philosopher-writer, it is this voice, welcomed by an "inner ear," that constitutes a vocatio, an inner call that makes itself heard in its urgency and necessity. The task of writing then appears as necessary for a researcher, an ordinary person to whom something extraordinary happens: an event that brings forth a voice that leaves one speechless, the other voice within oneself. For

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>188</sup> Roland Barthes, «Listening», op. cit., p. 250-251.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>189</sup> [When I read I write within myself, and when I write (for myself or for someone else), I read within myself] Denis Viennet, *L'écriture de soi et l'experience d'entendre une voix 'autre'*, in: *Mnemosyne o la costruzione del senso. L'ascoltato, il sentito dire, la phonè in filigrana nei racconti di sé*, Presses Universitaires de Louvain, Louvain, n.3, 2010, p. 24.

Augustine, the self is then disposed as a place of listening and welcoming of the "divine" voice within oneself<sup>190</sup>

Listening, in this case, relates two subjects: man, and God. As Barthes notes: «Thus formed by the very history of the Christian religion [...] the injunction to listen [...] creates transference: "listen to me" means touch me, know that I exist»<sup>191</sup>. The subject of the *Confessions* recognises himself in listening to the voice of the Other within the self. However, listening to the divine voice is not a real conversation, it does not take place in a moment of self-presence, but is rather characterised by the perception of a voice that is both foreign and inner at the same time. This dynamic moves in what Nancy called the "sonorous present", i.e., in the space of the "renvoi". According to the *Confessions* model, listening falls into the second category proposed by Roland Barthes, which is "listening as deciphering". As already mentioned, "listening as deciphering" is a type of listening in which the subject elaborates reality's interpretation through codified practices (in in this case the religious one).

dedans de soi, étrangère à soi mais en même temps la plus intime. C'est cette voix, accueillie par une "oreille intérieure", qui constitue pour le philosophe-écrivain une *vocatio*, un appel intérieur, qui se fait entendre dans son urgence et sa nécessité. La tâche de l'écriture apparaît alors comme nécessaire pour un chercheur, homme ordinaire à qui il arrive quelque chose d'extraordinaire: un événement, par lequel survient une voix qui laisse sans voix, la voix autre au-dedans de soi. Pour Augustin, le soi se dispose alors comme lieu d'écoute et d'accueil de la voix "divine" en soi» Denis Viennet, art. cit., p. 25. For an in-depth study on listening to the voice in St. Augustine's *Confessions*, see: Pierre Courcelle, «Les "Voix" dans les Confessions de Saint Augustin», *Hermes*, vol. 80, n.1, pp.31-46; William North «Hearing voices in late antiquity: an Aural Approach to Augustine's Confessions», in: Glenn, Jason and Brentano, Robert (eds.) *The Middle Ages in texts and texture: reflection on Medieval sources*, University of Toronto Press, Toronto, 2011.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>191</sup> Roland Barthes, op. cit., p. 251.

In the modern era, however, listening changes. According to Barthes there is an overcoming of the disciplinary logic that implied a rigid assignment of hierarchical functions<sup>192</sup>. Listening is no longer a voluntary and conscious act, nor is it always a search for meaning, but rather a process of asemantic exploration directed both outside and within the subject:

[W]hereas for centuries listening could be defined as an intentional act of audition (to listen is to *want* to hear, in all conscience), today it is granted the power (and virtually the function) of playing over unknown spaces: listening includes in its field not only the unconscious in the topical sense of the term, but also, so to speak, its lay forms: the implicit, the indirect, the supplementary, the delayed<sup>193</sup>

Barthes defines modern listening as «travail sur soi»<sup>194</sup>, a perception based on the paradigm of psychoanalytic listening, attentive to nuances of speech and intonation rather than the literal composition of words. As Giovannetti states: «una parola pensata è anche una parola ascoltata – ascoltata dentro di sé»<sup>195</sup>. From a literary point of view, the reconfiguration of listening as an activity of exploration of the "implicit, the indirect, the supplementary, the delayed", is an idea that suggests «a reframing of authorship as a form of active and fertile *aural* reception. It also recasts the

<sup>192</sup> In Barthes' words: «The roles implied by the act of listening no longer have the same fixity as in the past; there is no longer, on one side, someone who speaks, gives himself away, confesses, and, on the other, someone who listens, keeps silent, judges and sanctions [...]. It is not possible to imagine a free society, if we agree in advance to preserve within it the old modes of listening: those of the believer, the disciple, and the patient» Roland Barthes, «Listening», op. cit, p. 259.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>193</sup> Ibid., p. 258.
<sup>194</sup> Plínio W. Prado Jr, «Sistere. Proust et l'aspect tonal», *De la résistance*.

Rue Descartes, vol. 15, PUF, Paris, 1997, p. 6.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>195</sup> [a thought word is also a heard word – heard within oneself] Paolo Giovannetti, op. cit., p.32.

written text as a mute sign that nonetheless resonates and echoes within the mind (and body) of the reader»<sup>196</sup>.

Particularly interesting in this regard is the argument presented by Plínio W. Prado Jr in Sistere. Proust et l'aspect tonal<sup>197</sup>. In the study, the researcher shows how listening is important in Proust and is employed by the writer both in the process of reading and writing. According to Plínio Prado, Proust's Recherche, which Deleuze calls an «apprentissage des signes»<sup>198</sup>, is the learning of sensitive and attentive listening (especially relating to involuntary reminiscence) that constitutes Proust's trajectory in becoming a writer. This voice, according to Prado, is an unconscious tone of the writing subject that refers to a voice heard during childhood: the voice of the mother. In Proust's case, we are dealing with the «maternal imaginary»<sup>199</sup> on which we dwelt at length at the end of the previous chapter. The "sound bath" in the mother's voice is of crucial importance in the formation of the future artist: it is through listening to the mother's voice that the writer learns to pay attention not so much to the meaning of words as to intonations. This moment: «leaves the child Marcel bewildered, hilflos, is an initiation into listening, into the "discernment of the right tone", the "fundamental tone", that governs and makes possible each singular writing,

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>196</sup> Marilia Librandi, Writing by Ear, op. cit., p. 6.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>197</sup> Plínio W Prado Jr, «Sistere. Proust et l'aspect tonal», *De la résistance. Rue Descartes*, vol. 15, PUF, Paris, 1997.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>198</sup> See: Gilles Deleuze, *Proust et les signes*, PUF, Paris, 1964.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>199</sup> In *First Things*, Mary Jacobus defines the "maternal imaginary" as follows: «the fantasmatic mother who may or may not possess reproductive parts, nurturing functions, and specific historical or material manifestations; but who exists chiefly in the realm of images and imagos (whether perceived or imagined), mirroring and identifications, icons and figures; who is associated sometimes with feminist nostalgia, sometimes with ideological mystification; who surfaces in connection with melancholia, matriphobia, and matricide, and plays a key part in Kristevian theories of signification» Routledge, New York and London, 1995, p. iv.

and ultimately into the characteristic tone of a style»<sup>200</sup>. The mother's "accent profonde" is thus inscribed in a watermark in Poust's writing<sup>201</sup>. Writing is for Proust «lire et traduire le "livre interieur" des signes inconnus», existing «dejà en chacun de nous»<sup>202</sup>. According to Viennet's interpretation:

According to this approach, the Proustian voice could be designated as an embodied voice, heard from within, and which remains in us like the childhood of a past that has not passed, a remainder of lost time resisting the passage of time, arising in us by chance in existence. Self-narrative would then remain secretly attuned in unison with this primary, archaic voice, a voice other than our own but in our own, foreign to us although within us, which would come to complexify and disturb the identity of a non-fixed, non-homogenous self, and whose constitution would essentially depend on a possible and uncertain future. From then on, there would only be a self-narrative and a writing insofar as

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>200</sup> «laisse l'enfant Marcel désemparé, *hilflos*, est un initium à l'écoute, au "discernement du ton juste", au ton fondamental, celui qui préside et rend possible chaque écriture singulière, et finalement au ton caractéristique d'un style» Denis Viennet, art. cit., p. 26.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>201</sup> As Cavarero points out: «According to this broad, speculative horizon, in fact, insofar as the voice can be traced back to the orality of the maternal scene (which is, so to speak, a radically primal orality where the semantic order has not yet made its entrance), the voice penetrates and invades writing. Writing is here understood as a practice but, moreover, as a text [...]. the rhythmic and musical texture of speech. [...] Speech [*la parola*], even when it is written, thus gets analyzed through its sonorous matrix. In other words, this is a theoretical perspective that traces both spoken and written language back to a vocal sphere that is the common matrix of both». Adriana Cavarero, *For More than One Voice*, op. cit., p. 132.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>202</sup> Proust, *Le temps retrouvé*, quoted in Plínio W. Prado Jr, *Proust et l'aspect tonal*, art. cit., p. 5.

this would also be a writing of the other of the self, in which it is a matter of listening to this other, and this other as childhood<sup>203</sup>

According to Plínio Prado, self-narrative in Proust, comes from the listening to an embodied "other". This voice, coming from the past, from an infantine and pre-linguistic level, contitutes the present identity of the writing subject. As mentioned in the first chapter, childhood is often connected not only to a dimension of inexperience, but also to a relational construction of identity. As noted by Stefano Brugnolo, when childhood is literary evoked: «is not only and not so much a stage of life as it is a mental dimension, that of inexperience [...] of the readiness to feel without immediately wanting to understand»<sup>204</sup>. Childhood is thus configured as a moment of pure perception, of opennes to the other. This condition is what Freud labelled as the «inneren Ausland»<sup>205</sup> and Plínio Prado calls *enfance*, referring to the the definition previously coined by Jean François Lyotard:

<sup>«</sup>Selon cette pente, la voix proustienne pourrait être désignée comme une voix incorporée, entendue de l'intérieur, et qui resterait en nous comme l'enfance d'un passé qui n'est pas passé, un reste de temps perdu résistant au passage du temps, surgissant en nous dans le hasard de l'existence. L'écriture du soi resterait alors secrètement accordée à l'unisson avec cette voix première, archaïque, voix autre que la nôtre dans la nôtre, étrangère à nous quoiqu'en nous, laquelle viendrait complexifier et troubler l'identité d'un soi non-figé, non-homogène, et dont la constitution relèverait essentiellement d'un possible et incertain a-venir. Dès lors, il n'y aurait, semble-t-il, de récit et d'écriture du soi que pour autant que celle-ci serait également une écriture de l'autre du soi, dans laquelle il s'agit d'écouter cet autre, et cet autre comme enfance» Denis Viennet, art. cit., p. 26.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>204</sup> «non è solo e tanto un'età della vita ma una dimensione della mente, quella dell'inesperienza [...] della disponibilità a sentire senza voler subito capire» Stefano Brugnolo, (ed.) *Il ricordo d'infanzia nelle letterature del Novecento*, Pacini, Pisa, 2012, p. 16.

 $<sup>^{205}</sup>$  It is Plínio Prado himself who explicitly quotes Freud, stating: «ce qui est ainsi barré, sacrifié et perdu, n'est pas détruit pour autant. Cela persiste, à l'insu

No one knows how to write. Each one [...] writes to capture in and through the text something that he or she doesn't know how to write. That which cannot be written, one knows. [...] Kafka calls it indubitable, Sartre inarticulable, Joyce inappropriable. For Freud, it is the infantile, for Valéry, disorder, for Arendt, birth. Let us baptize it *infantia*, that which cannot be spoken. A childhood that is not an age of life and does not pass. It haunts discourse. The latter never stops pushing it aside; it is its separation. But by doing so, it also persistently constitutes it, as lost. Unwittingly, it thus shelters it. It is its remainder<sup>206</sup>

In this persistent psychic condition, the relationship with the other is not an exclusively outward-looking relationship but is instead a relationship

de l'adulte, comme un reste (d'indéterminé, de possibles) qui l'habite et le hante secrètement, irréductible et indestructible. L'infantile est précisément ce "territoire étranger" chez soi, cet "extérieur" demeurant à l'intérieur de l'édification adulte. *Inneren Ausland*, écrit Freud, qui précise que ce reste étranger, inconnu et inconnaissable (mais familier), demeure toujours actif et efficace» [For all that, what is thus crossed out, sacrificed, and lost is not destroyed. It persists, unbeknownst to the adult, as an irreducible and indestructible remnant (of the indeterminate, of the possible) that secretly inhabits and haunts him or her. The infantile is this "foreign territory" at home, this "outside" that remains within the adult edifice. *Inneren Ausland*, Freud writes, stating that this foreign, unknown, and unknowable (but familiar) remnant is always active and effective] Plínio Walder Prado Jr, « Le reste d'enfance », in: Jean-François Lyotard, Moralités postmodernes, Galilée, Paris, 2005.

<sup>206</sup> «Nul ne sait écrire. Chacun, [...] écrit pour attraper par et dans le texte quelque chose qu'il ne sait pas écrire. Qui ne se laissera pas écrire, il le sait. [...] Kafka l'appelle indubitable, Sartre inarticulable, Joyce inappropriable. Pour Freud, c'est l'infantile, pour Valéry le désordre, pour Arendt la naissance. Baptisons-la *infantia*, ce qui ne se parle pas. Une enfance qui n'est pas un âge de la vie et qui ne passe pas. Elle hante le discours. Celui-ci ne cesse pas de la mettre à l'écart, il est sa séparation. Mais il s'obstine, par là même, à la constituer, comme perdue. A son insu, il l'abrite donc. Elle est son reste» Jean-François Lyotard, *Lectures d'enfance*, Galilée, Paris, 1991, p. 9.

with the other in oneself: « The soul will never be rid of or absolved from this stranger within oneself; it will never overcome it, as this other is constitutive of it»<sup>207</sup>. The subject cannot free themselves from this condition, since: «the soul is held hostage by this situation. It remains indebted to what it had to ignore in order to come into the world, a hostage to what it had to lose and forget in order to be born»<sup>208</sup>. The phase that the soul had to forget in order to come into the world is precisely that prelinguistic phase, that phase of Hilflosigkeit, of pure resonance with the external world. In this sense, self-narrative is an attempt to return – through adult language - to that phase of life that "holds the soul hostage". This condition – or the search for it – is configured in Prado's thought as the origin of writing. At this point the questions is: is there a language (and here a paradox) capable to convey this acoustic-perceptual dimension, this yet to be meaningful language? The persistence of childhood is signalled according to Prado by a non-linear temporality, by a narrative that draws on memories, images, words that are associated through «le libre jeu de l'imagination»<sup>209</sup>. From a linguistic point of view:

In linguistic terms, the *infantia*'s persistence is indicated by the indeterminacy that haunts and threatens each articulation of "adult" language (designation, meaning, destination), every chaining of one sentence to the next, each "How to continue?"<sup>210</sup>

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>207</sup> «De cet étranger chez soi, l'âme ne sera jamais quitte ou acquittée; elle n'y viendra jamais à bout, cet autre lui étant constitutif» Plínio Prado, art. cit., p. 7.

 $<sup>^{208}</sup>$  «l'âme en est l'otage. Elle reste endettée à l'égard de ce qu'elle a dû ignorer pour venir au monde, otage de ce qu'elle a dû perdre et oublier pour naître» Ibid., p. 7.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>209</sup> Plínio Prado, *Sistere*, art. cit., p. 10.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>210</sup> «En termes langagiers [...], la persistance de l'*infantia* se signale dans l'indétermination qui hante et menace chaque articulation du langage "adulte"

Only a writing without beginning or end, without chronology, only a rhizomatic<sup>211</sup> writing succeeds in expressing a self that listens to themselves, a multiple identity, inhabited by the discourses of the Other. Only this kind of writing allows the *infantia* to resist and to exist. The dimension of listening does not only characterise writing, but also reading, since, just like writing, reading is an event that is inaugurated by listening to the other in oneself (*l'autre en soi*). It is, according to the scholar, a "miracle", a "partage de la singularité". By quoting Proust he notes that:

The tonality of the text that the act of reading reveals resonates with the childhood of the one who reads. Thus, a resonance is established between two singularities, since in reading (according to the so-called conditions), it is a matter of "receiving communication" from another thought, while remaining attentive to oneself, to the "fruitful work of the mind on itself" 212

Summarising, Prado offers the hypothesis of considering the activity of reading-writing as an exercise to try and capture the "right tone", an affective tone that lies in the sonority of words. A kind of unconscious tone that would be in debt of a voice, of the musicality of a voice (the mother's

(désignation, signification, destination), chaque enchaînement d'une phrase à l'autre, chaque "Comment continuer?"» Plínio Prado, *Restes d'enfance*, op. cit., p. 7.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>211</sup> We refer here to the rhizomatic writing theorised by Deleuze and Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus*: «Un rhizome peut être rompu, brisé en un endroit quelconque, il reprend suivant telle out elle de ses lignes et suivant d'autres lignes» Gilles Deleuze e Félix Guattari, *Mille plateaux*, Paris, Minuit, 1980, p. 16.

<sup>212 «</sup>La tonalite du texte que discerne la lecture est en resonance avec l'enfance de celui ou celle qui lit. Une resonance s'établit ainsi entre deux singularités; puisque dans la lecture (selon les conditions dites), il s'agit de "recevoir communication" d'une *autre* pensée, toute en restant à l'écoute de soi, du "travail fécound de l'esprit sur lui-même"» Marcel Proust, *Contre Sainte-Beuve*, quoted in Plínio W. Prado *Sistere*, art. cit., p. 11.

voice in Proust's primal and original reading scene). This is an embedded voice, heard "from the inside", which would remain in us as the childhood of a past that is not past, a residue of *temps perdu* (lost time) resisting the passage of time. Self-narrative would then stay secretly tuned in unison with this first, archaic voice, another voice than the subject's, foreign to us although in us, which would complicate and confuse the identity of a non-static, non-homogeneous self. Prado's argument applies to Proust's *Recherche* many features I investigated in the first chapter from a philosophical point of view:

- The autobiographical genre, as far back as St. Augustine's *Confessions*, takes the form of listening to a "divine" voice within oneself. Writing in this sense is a response to that voice, to the Other. This argument perfectly represents Derrida's teory on *Otobiography*.
- In Proust's case, the voice of the Other is a voice within the subject, a voice from the past that persists in the present. This type of listening is what Barthes defines a "modern listening" (listening to the unconscious) that leads to a rhythmic costruction of the Self (Lacoue-Labarthe).
- If we stick to Prado's argument about Proust, the writer's identity is built on a movement of "renovi" and "resonance" between childhood, writing and reading, the autobiographical writer can be thus considered a "diapason-subject" (Nancy).
- The acoustic dimension of memory the one which connects childhood (Lyotard) to the autobiographical impetus (Lacoue-Labarthe) emphasizes the importance of the mother's voice (Kristeva, Irigaray).
- In a textual/stylistical point of view, childhood's prelinguistic persistence is indicated by the indeterminacy that haunts and threatens each articulation of "adult" language

such as designation, meaning, destination. Only in reverberation and vocal rhythm is it possible for the subject to find a pre-symbolic unity (Cixous).

According to this hypothesis, autobiographical writing will deviate from the classical model, since the subject is not a monolithic identity, but a fragmented one, composed by the one and the multiple:

It would not be a matter of an ego that would exhibit itself in a personal story, but rather a critical, alien gaze turned simultaneously towards the other (others) and towards oneself. Therefore, there would be no question of autobiography in the classical sense. [...] Consequently, the self would not tell its story in the traditional sense of the term, but rather it would bear witness to the foreign thing within itself, to an unrepresentable that exceeds (re)presentation. It would give unconditional primacy and respect to this otherness. [...] This writing would hold a major and musical relationship with affect. The impression of sounds within oneself would take the form of affect: the in-fans does not formulate anything because he/she does not know, but he/she captures sounds and sonorities, he/she hears the affective or emotional musicality. This would then be, later on, for the child inhabiting the adult, the very condition of style within any research<sup>213</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>213</sup> «Il ne serait donc pas question d'un ego qui s'exhiberait dans une histoire personnelle, mais d'un regard critique, étranger, tourné simultanément vers l'autre (autrui) et vers soi-même. Il ne serait donc pas question d'autobiographie au sens classique. [...] Dès lors, le soi ne se raconterait pas au sens traditionnel du terme, mais plutôt il témoignerait de la chose étrangère en soi, d'un imprésentable qui excède la (re)présentation. Il accorderait un primat et un respect inconditionnels à cette altérité. [...] Dans cette écriture se tiendrait un rapport majeur et musical à

In a few lines, Viennet manages to sketch out many of the aspects on which I will focus later (affective dimension, return to childhood, multiple identity, metamorphosis of the self). Before turning to a proper textual analysis, I do believe it is necessary to briefly present the historical-literary context in which Elias Canetti, Natalia Ginzburg and Nathalie Sarraute operate before sketching a proper phenomenology of oto-bio-graphy.

# 2.3. Self narratives in the Age of Suspicion

In the twentieth century, the dimension of childhood, the one which "haunts the discourse", particularly haunts the literary discourse. As Francesco Orlando highlights in *Infanzia memoria e storia da Rousseau ai romantici*, childhood «no longer represents a "theme", but a primary, intrusive, and often decisive precondition of the human condition»<sup>214</sup>. In twentieth century literature, childhood becomes «a crucial and almost ecstatic moment of individuation, of self-understanding, a moment that makes the subject what they will fundamentally be»<sup>215</sup>. Even if, as Sergio Zatti suggests, it is from Rousseau onwards that childhood becomes the

l'affect. L'impression des sons au-dedans de soi s'effectuerait sous la forme de l'affect: l'in-fans ne formule rien parce qu'il ne sait pas, mais il capte les sons et les sonorités, il entend la musicalité affective ou affectuelle. Ce qui serait alors, plus tard, pour l'enfant habitant l'adulte, la condition même du style au sein de toute recherche» Denis Viennet, art. cit., p. 28.

e spesso determinante della condizione umana» Francesco Orlando, *Infanzia memoria e storia da Rousseau ai Romantici*, Pacini, Pisa, 2007, p. 3.

<sup>«</sup>un momento fatale e quasi estatico di individuazione, di autocomprensione, un momento che rende il soggetto quello che fondamentalmente sarà» Stefano Brugnolo (ed.), *Il ricordo d'infanzia nelle letterature del Novecento*, op. cit., p. 14.

founding scene of all self-knowledge<sup>216</sup>, it is only in the twentieth century that, thanks to the aforementioned influence of Proust and that of Freudian

<sup>216</sup> Rousseau's contribution to the twentieth-century development of the récit d'enfance is, according to Zatti, revolutionary. Rousseau is the first to succeed in valorising childhood as an autonomous and significant dimension of life, and indeed as an original moment that then influences the rest of existence: «Questo tipo di récit si rende possibile solo dopo che si è consolidato un preciso status antropologico e sociale del bambino, quando cioè subentra una piena autonomia e legittimazione rispetto a pregiudizi e censure (com'è noto, il bambino è stato per secoli privo di interesse biografico perché considerato soltanto un adulto imperfetto [...] Nel raccontare con un'inedita serietà il fanciullo che è stato Rousseau accorda attenzione a fenomeni prima reputati futili o ridicoli. Ciò che ha disturbato in lui, come ha mostrato magistralmente, non è tanto la meschinità o l'impudicizia dei contenuti di ciò che racconta quanto la serietà del trattamento letterario che a questi veniva riservato. La nascita del racconto d'infanzia coincide quindi non solo con quella nobilitazione del suo protagonista, ma con l'emancipazione dalla dimensione puramente aneddotica e da una finalità esemplare che lo concepisce in funzione quasi soltanto preparatoria e prolettica. Assistiamo così a un doppio gesto simultaneo di affrancamento dallo sguardo giudicante di Dio (come nell'archetipo e dal potere legittimante della genealogia (un classico nell'autobiografia di antico regime), che proprio il récit d'enfance viene di fatto a rimpiazzare» [This type of récit is only possible after the child's precise anthropological and social status has been established, i.e., when full autonomy and legitimisation with regard to prejudice and censure takes over (as is well known, the child was for centuries devoid of biographical interest because he was considered only an imperfect adult). Rousseau draws attention to phenomena previously dismissed as futile or ridiculous by recounting the child he was with unprecedented seriousness. As he masterfully demonstrated, what was disturbing in his writing was not so much the meanness or impudence of the contents of what he narrated as the seriousness of the literary treatment reserved towards them. The birth of the récit d'enfance coincides not only with the importance given to its protagonist, but also with its emancipation from the purely anecdotal dimension and from an exemplary purpose that sees it as primarily preparatory and proleptic. Thus, we see a double simultaneous gesture of liberation from God's judging gaze (as in the Augustinian archetype) and from the legitimising power of genealogy (a classic in ancien régime autobiography), which the récit d'enfance eventually replaces] Sergio Zatti «Morfologia del racconto d'infanzia» in: Stefano Brugnolo (ed.) Il ricordo d'infanzia nelle letterature del Novecento, op. cit., p. 28. On this topic see also Giorgio Agamben Infanzia e Storia, Einaudi, Torino 1978, p. 37 and Francesco Orlando *Infanzia memoria e storia*, op. cit., pp. 31-58.

psychoanalysis, childhood's memory becomes to be seen as an essential period of formation, a moment in which the subject elbatorate their worldview: «it is as if all writers, having to confront the loss of clear connections capable of giving meaning and coherence to individual lives, have often turned to childhood to seek that lost sense and coherence»<sup>217</sup>. However, while « it was thanks to psychanalisis that childhood memories found a re-motivation»<sup>218</sup>, on the other hand, Freudian psychanalisis states that a large amount of our memories is retrospectively manufacted. The possibility of having direct access to childhood experiences is seriously questioned. Based on these premises, one might expect psychoanalysis to have destroyed the classic childhood narrative, but the opposite has occurred: by emphasising the first years of life, psychoanalysis has undoubtedly conferred scientific legitimacy on this type of narrative, but it has also cast serious doubt on its genesis, if not actually denounced it as a lie<sup>219</sup>. Brugnolo notes that «there is a specifically twentieth-century attention and concern about the gaps in memory and the processes of forgetting»<sup>220</sup>, in this context, the childhood story also becomes an analysis

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>217</sup> «è come se dovendo tutti gli scrittori confrontarsi con la perdita di nessi evidenti in grado di dare senso e coerenza alle vite individuali si siano spesso rivolti all'infanzia per cercare quel senso e quella coerenza perdute» Stefano Brugnolo (ed.), op. cit., p. 367.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>218</sup> «è stato grazie alla psicanalisi che il ricordo infantile ha trovato una rimotivazione» Sergio Zatti, art. cit., p. 29.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>219</sup> On this topic see: Philippe Lejeune, *L'ère du soupçon*, in: Id., (ed.) «Le récit d'enfance en question», *Cahiers de Sémiotique Textuelles*, Université Paris X, n.12, 1988, pp. 41-70.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>220</sup> «c'è un'attenzione e una preoccupazione specificamente novecentesca circa le lacune della memoria e i processi del dimenticare» Stefano Brugnolo, op. cit., p.15. On this topic Brugnolo gives some examples of scholars concerned with the processes of remembering and forgetting such as Harald Weinrich, Aleida Assman and Paul Ricœur.

of the autobiographical project itself and of the desire to investigate the processes of memory <sup>221</sup>.

In the second half of the century, scientific and artistic attention is not only focused on memory, but also on language. As Kristeva notes, the world of human sciences, mindful of the splitting of subjectivity implied by the discovery of the unconscious, attempted to draw its consequences with respect of the different practices of discourse: «Following upon the phenomenological and existentialist shock of the postwar period, the sixties witnessed a theoretical ebullience that could roughly be summarized as leading to the discovery of the determinative role of language in all human sciences»<sup>222</sup>.

If the discovery of the unconscious casts doubts on the univocal concepts of "subject", "identity" and "language", this process also affects

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>221</sup> According to Lejeune: «a première vue, on pourrait penser que la psychanalyse est venue justifier le projet autobiographique, en donnant une sorte de fondement théorique aux recherches jusque-là empiriques des autobiographes. Elle apporterait confirmation aux postulats suivants: que la personnalité s'explique par son histoire et que la partie la plus importante de cette histoire est l'enfance. Elle mettrait à la disposition des futurs autobiographes des méthodes plus efficaces. La réalité est très différente. Sur le plan théorique, la psychanalise permet non seulment d'expliquer l'histoire de la personnalité, que cherche à cerner l'autobiographe, mais elle considère le projet et l'acte autobiographiques comme des éléments de cette histoire et les englobe dans son explication» [At first sight, one might think that psychoanalysis has come to justify the autobiographical project, by giving a kind of theoretical foundation to the hitherto empirical research of autobiographers. It would confirm the following postulates: that personality is explained by its history and that the most important part of this history is childhood. It would provide future autobiographers with more effective methods. The reality is very different. On the theoretical level, psychoanalysis not only makes it possible to explain the history of the personality, which the autobiographer seeks to identify, but it considers the autobiographical project and act as elements of this history and includes them in its explanation] Philippe Lejeune, L'Autobiographie en France, Libraire Armand Colin, Paris, 1971, p. 91.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>222</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language*, op. cit., p. vii.

the reader. The reader «has been learning about too many things, and he is unable to forget entirely all he has learned [...] He has made the acquaintance of Joyce, Proust and Freud; the trickle, imperceptible from without, of the interior monologue; the infinitely profuse growth of the psychological world and the vast, as yet almost unexplored regions of the unconscious»<sup>223</sup>. In a time when «the genius of suspicion has appeared on the scene»<sup>224</sup> how could a reader believe in writing in the first person? in the narrative of experience?

Published in 1950, Nathalie Sarraute's *Age of Suspicion*, challenges the notion that reality could be captured in writing. In her investigation on the novel, Sarraute directly addresses childhood's importance in the literary scene. She states:

Today, a constantly rising tide has been flooding us with literary works that still claim to be novels and in which a being devoid of outline, indefinable, intangible, and invisible, an anonymous "I", who is at once all and nothing, and who as often as not is but the reflection of the author himself, has usurped the role of the hero, occupying the place of honour. Our minds might be set at rest, if we could impute this method of procedure to an egocentricity peculiar to adolescence, to the timidity or inexperience of the beginner. As it happens, however, this youthful malady has attacked some of the most important works of our time (from Remembrance of Things Past and Marshlands, to the Miracle de la rose, not to mention the Notebook of Malte Laurids Brigge, Journey to the End of the Night, and the Diary of Antoine Roquentin (Nausea); in other words, works in which

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>223</sup> Nathalie Sarraute, *The Age of Suspicion. Essays on the Novel*, Braziller, New York, 1963, p. 62.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>224</sup> Ibid., p. 57.

the authors have given immediate proof of very evident mastery and rare forcefulness. What is revealed, in fact, by the present evolution of the character in fiction is just the opposite of regression to an infantile state. It shows, on the part of both author and reader, an unusually sophisticated state of mind. For not only are they both wary of the character, but through him, they are wary of each other. He had been their meeting ground, the solid base from which they could take off in a common effort towards new experiments and new discoveries. He has now become the converging point of their mutual distrust, the devasted ground on which they confront each other <sup>225</sup>

Literature's interest in the infantile dimension, according to Sarraute, does not demonstrate a regression, but a particular sophistication on the part of both writer and reader. According the writer, suspicion pervades literature not only in terms of content, but also in terms of structure. The atmosphere no longer favored the kind of literature readers were used to, a literature that strove for a cohesive narrative and a straightforward collection of events. On the contrary, the mid twentieth century favored a literature that challenged the reader to forget what he had come to expect and that demanded more attention:

[The reader] has seen time cease to be the swift stream that carried the plot forward, and become a stagnant pool at the bottom of which a slow, subtle decomposition is in progress; he has seen our actions lose their usual motives and accepted meanings, he has witnessed the appearance of hitherto unknown sentiments and seen those that were most familiar change both in aspect and name. In fact, he has learned so much and learned

it so well, that he has begun to doubt whether the novelist's artificially constructed object is capable of secreting the wealth of the real object<sup>226</sup>

This new kind of literature tries to break the cohesiveness of the narrative voice, the characters, the plot, and the chronological order. Therefore, the new narrative discourse calles attention to multiple meanings and enlists the reader's collaboration in making sense of it. According to Sarraute the aim of the narrative is «to show the co-existence of contradictory emotions and to reproduce as closely as possible the wealth and complexity of the worldw<sup>227</sup>. On this basis, autobiographers are discouraged from writing about their past, for this new "age" rejects classical attempts to develop traditional characters, coherent plots, or objective portrayals of events<sup>228</sup>. Autobiography then seems an impossible project, and anyone with the intention of writing about their life using narrative devices from the nineteenth century would certainly be suspiciously charged with «mummy-like stiffness» and «flat appearance of painted scenery»<sup>229</sup>. Nevertheless, writers were not disdainful of the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>226</sup> Ibid., p. 62.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>227</sup> Nathalie Sarraute, *The Age of Suspicion*, op. cit., p. 67.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>228</sup> Sarraute's disdain for autobiography is well attested. Revealingly, she remarks: «Je n'aime pas l'autobiographie. Je n'ai aucune confiance dans les autobiographies, parce qu'on [...] veut se montrer sous un certain jour. [...] C'est toujours très partial — enfin, moi, je n'y crois jamais. Ce qui m'intéresse toujours quand je lis les vraies autobiographies, c'est de voir "ah bon c'est comme ça qu'il voulait qu'on le voie» [I don't like autobiography. I have no confidence at all in autobiographies, because [their authors] want to show [themselves] in a certain light. It's always very partial — at least, I never believe in them. What always interests me when I read true autobiographies is to see 'Oh, right, that's how he wanted us to see him] Broadcast on 5th April 1984 by Jean Montalbetti, on France-Culture: Entretien avec Natacha Sarraute. The transcription was done by Philippe in Jacques Lecarme and Eliane Lecarme-Tabone, quoted L'autobiographie, Armand Colin, Paris, 1997, p. 15.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>229</sup> Nathalie Sarraute, op. cit., p. 60.

autobiographical genre for long. They soon engaged in literary research of formal and thematic innovations and openly addressed the difficulty of capturing an objective and coherent image of the self<sup>230</sup>. The second half of the twentieth century, with the development of «indirectes, obliques, hybrides»<sup>231</sup> allowed the emergence of a series of «variations sur l'autobiographie»<sup>232</sup>.

# 2.4. Towards a phenomenology of Oto-bio-graphy

In 1975, Bruno Vercier gave a lecture entitled *Le Mythe du premier souvenir*. In his presentation, Vercier speaks of a number of constants in the *récit de soi* (and, in particular, the *récit d'enfance*). According to Vercier, when analysing works belonging – partially or totally – to the macrodefinition of *écriture de soi*, it is possible to outline a series of recurring themes, of which each text provides a particular realisation:

From the combination and overlapping of all the autobiographies, a kind of ideal narrative emerges, of which each work provides a particular realisation. This series, more or less complete depending on the case, would be roughly as follows: I was born, My father and mother, The house, The rest of the family, The first memory, Language, The outside

In the following decades, the term "autobiography" is to a certain extent repudiated, and instead writers preferred less referential titles, like Jacques Lanzmann's *Le Tetard* (subtitled "roman"). Serge Doubrovsky also avoided the term "autobiography" and coined the designation "autofiction" for his autobiographical work, *Fils* (1977).

Dominique Viart and Bruno Vercier, *La littérature française au présent: héritage, modernité, mutations*, Bordas, Paris, 2008, p. 28.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>232</sup> Ibid.

world, Animals, Death, Books, Vocation, School, Sex, The end of childhood<sup>233</sup>

In light of the cultural changes addressed so far, however, the categorisation proposed by Vercier seems not to respect the complexity that the autobiographical genre develops in the twentieth century. For that reason, it is Vercier himself, in the same speech, who makes it clear that a text to be defined as "autobiographical" does not necessarily have to include all of these elements. As explained in the previous chapter, in the so-called "Age of Suspicion", there are numerous variations on autobiography. In the following pages, I will attempt to connect all of the elements – philosophical and literary –gathered thus far, in order to determine whether it is possible to theorise an oto-bio-graphy from a perspective that mainly focuses on the acoustic dimension of experience.

#### • The Ear of the Other

As previously stated, in Derrida's point of view, autobiography is intrinsecally directed to the Other. This idea is shared by philosopher Paul Ricœur. Ricœur's thought on the subject and intersubjectivity is a particularly intriguing articulation, precisely because it accounts for its extreme complexity. Ricœur elaborates a "hermeneutics of the self" in *Oneself as Another* (1990). Having criticised the utopia of the subject's immediate self-knowledge of itself, Ricœur elaborates a conception of identity as the result of a long hermeneutic process of the subject in the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>233</sup> «Du rapprochement et de la superposition de toutes les autobiographies se dégage une sorte de récit idéal, dont chaque œuvre fournit une réalisation particulière. Cette série, plus ou moins complète selon le cas, serait à peu près la suivante: Je suis né, Mon père et ma mère, La maison, Le reste de la famille, Le premier souvenir, Le langage, Le monde extérieur, Les animaux, La mort, Les livres, La vocation, L'école, Le sexe, La fin de l'enfance» Bruno Vercier, «Le mythe du premier souvenir: Pierre Loti, Michel Leiris», *Revue d'histoire littéraire de la France*, Presses Universitaires de France, n.6, 1975, pp. 1029-1046, p. 1033.

world of signs of the "other" (in its various forms: language, institutions, morals, interpersonal relations, etc.), as a conquest and re-appropriation of self. Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud, according to Ricœur, were "masters of suspicion". The object of doubt, according to these authors, is not just the external world's reality, but the world of subjective consciousness itself, which is transformed from an original and certain datum into a "task," the long and arduous task of becoming conscious, through the recognition within oneself of the multiple traces of the other. The perspective on identity is thus shifted to the root: the subject's original belonging to itself, taken almost for granted, is overturned in the estrangement of a self that is constitutively and originally decentralised from itself. According to this perspective, otherness is implicated at an original and profound level in the process of constituting the self<sup>234</sup>. As I tried to demonstrate through the overview on the philosophical oto-centric theories, the shift from visual to auditory implies a shift from a self-defined subject to a relational one<sup>235</sup>. Nonetheless, otherness enters the literary discurse not only in a theoretical way, but also in a practical one, since the interest attached to the other's receptive consciousness of one's creation is a modern manifestation. Roland Barthes remarks that «classic criticism has never paid any attention to the reader; for it, the writer is the only person in literature»<sup>236</sup>. In modern times,

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>234</sup> See: Paul Ricœur, *Oneself as Another*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1995.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>235</sup> See: Barbara Ann Schapiro, *Literature and the Relational Self*, New York University Press, New York, 1995.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>236</sup> Roland Barhes, «The Death of the Author», in: Id., *Image, Music, Text*, Hill and Wang, New York, 1988, p.148. As Ann Jefferson points out: «The twentieth century had already moved the reader to the centre of the literary stage: Proust claimed that his readers would be not so much readers of his novel as 'les propres lecteurs d'eux-mêmes' ['the readers of their own selves'], the book being no more than 'le moyen de lire en eux-mêmes' ['the means of reading what lay inside themselves']. Gide saw the whole business of writing as one that was necessarily completed by the reader for whom the prime interest of reading was

especially in the second part of the twentieth century, autobiography appeals increasingly to the reader's participation in the disentangling of one's life story. The autobiographical thus becomes a mental process of creation that requires both the writer's and the reader's participation. As we saw, this was the pivotal concept leading to Derrida's definition of Otobiography. According to the philosopher, the understanding of literature, and specifically of autobiography, lies between the productive consciousness of an individual (the writer) and the receptive consciousness of the Other (the reader). On the one hand, the autobiographers' own experiential "horizon" (of their past and their present) and cognition (mental power of creation) are reflected in the autobiographical enterprise, and on the other hand, the reader does not meet the autobiographer directly and reads their words using their experiential horizon (of their own past and of their present) and cognition (their mental power of interpretation). While reading, the autobiographer's and the reader's life experiences overlap. Through this mental overlapping, autobiography expresses its human relevance as a form of communication between one individual and another: conceived by the autobiographer as a (metaphorical) echo of their life, the autobiography is offered to the reader as a possibility opening upon new experiences in the space Nancy labelled as "resonance". Nevertheless, in the act of reading, one also brings to the understanding of another's life story his own experience of the world, and hence, in the end, autobiography becomes

precisely the participation in the text that it required of him: 'L'histoire requiert sa collaboration [du lecteur] pour se bien dessiner,' ['the story requires his [the reader's] collaboration in order to become fully apparent'] he wrote in his *Journal des Faux-monnayeurs*. And Sartre, too, saw the reader as the ultimate component in the literary enterprise. '[L]a lecture est création,' ['reading is creation'] he affirmed, meaning that the reader's task is to 'create' what the writer merely 'reveals'. For Sartre, to write is necessarily to write for the reader, to respond to what he calls the reader's aspiration, and to offer him the chance of enacting his own freedom» Ann Jefferson, *Nathalie Sarraute*, *Fiction and Theory. Questions of difference*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2004, p. 3.

again an echo, an echo of the reader's own experience (i. e., Plínio Prado's interpretation of Proust)<sup>237</sup>.

#### • Resonance and non-sequential narrative

With the discovery of the unconscious and the interest developed around the functioning of memory, one of the most important transformations in twentieth-century autobiography is surely the recognition that self-narratives are a narrative construction<sup>238</sup>. Autobiography then, is

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>237</sup> According to Barret Mandel «the autobiography (as genre) embodies truth when the reader seeks confirmation of his or her own perceptions of reality in terms of those experienced by another mortal. [...] The truth of literature is created as much by the reader as by the author. I [as a reader] can create the autobiography as true or false. It requires my presence in order to reflect reality» Barret Mandel, «Full of Life Now», in: James Olney (ed.) op.cit., pp. 54-55. The importance of the reader in the autobiographical process has been noticed in several feminist theories. A great number of contributions made through feminist approaches to autobiography center mainly on the discursive construction of identity and referentiality and on issues if reading and reception. On this topic see Sidonie Smith, A poetics of Women's Autobiography: Marginality and the Fictions of Self-Representation, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1987. The construction of the self as an intersubjective experience is one of the key-points investigated by: Judith Butler, Gender Trouble. Feminism and the Subversion of Identity, Routledge, London and New York, 2006; Tess Coslett, Celia Lury and Penny Summerfield, Feminism and Autobiography. Texts, Theories, Methods, Routledge, London, 2000; Adriana Cavarero, Tu che mi guardi, tu che mi racconti. Filosofia della narrazione, Feltrinelli, Milano, 2001; Luisa Passerini, Memoria e utopia. Il primate dell'intersoggettività, Bollati Boringhieri, Torino, 2003.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>238</sup> The premise that writing about the past is a creative process leads to the assumption that autobiography is an artifact. Stephen Shapiro in his well-read 1968 essay, persuasively argues that the autobiography is a form of literary art and that the autobiographer is a "maker": «Like the poet, the autobiographer is a maker. Frequently, the limits of language, the slipperiness of experience, the difficulties of both comprehending and re-creating experience become the *subjects* of autobiography, (...) this traditionally epistemological genre rings with the challenge to do the impossible: recapture time, shape the shapeless, make many one and one multiple, transform the inner image into a picture-mirror of others, make the flesh into words and words into flesh» Stephen Shapiro, «The Dark Continent of

not a duplication, verification, or report of the past but a construction of the past in the present moment. The autobiographer remembers their personal past retrospectively through their present consciousness, i. e., they revisit the past from a present point of view (this in what Derrida calls "différance"), and they use their imagination in the creation of an artistic artifact. As we saw, in this context, a particular importance is given to the process of memory. To James Olney, memory, as a faculty of the present, represents «the retrospective gathering up of a past-in-becoming into a present-as-being»<sup>239</sup> (this reminds us to Nancy's definition of "sonorous present"). This process presupposes alterity, a presence of "the Other" within the subject: in the fact of remembering the past in the present, the autobiographer imagines another person, another world<sup>240</sup>. Drawing from both reality (past) and imagination (present), autobiography creates the illusion of the past through language<sup>241</sup>. The creative process of reformulating the past based on both memory and imagination shapes the narratives. As noted by Dominique Viart and Bruno Vercier, «In contemporary autobiographical writing, fragmentation is increasingly prominent: texts often focus on particular "events" [...] Linear trajectories

Literature: Autobiography,» *Comparative Literature Studies*, vol. 5, n. 4, December 1968, Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 422.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>239</sup> «The power of imagination is as important to the autobiographer as it is to the novelist. When the autobiographer revisits the past from a present point of view, his memory distorts and transforms it. When a writer "tries to recapture his personal history", (...) he re-creates the past in the image of the present» see: James Olney, «The Ontology of Autobiography», in: Id., (ed.), *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1980, p. 24.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>240</sup> As James Olney states: «Time carries us away not only from others but from ourselves as well, and we are continuously dying to our own passing selves», James Olney, *Metaphors of Self*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1972, p. 29. As

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>241</sup> See Barret Mandel, art. cit., p. 65.

have been lost in favor of capturing moments»<sup>242</sup>. When the chronological structure is abandoned, the narrative tends to be based around associations. The abolition of chronology in the unconscious reflects in a narrative that is free from narrative construction. As Zatti remarks: «Chronological leaps, temporal plane shifts, intentional contaminations between the time of history and the time of discourse favor the self-aware, metanarrative dimension of a genre that is by definition fluid and constantly questions its own status of truthfulness and its own codes of definition»<sup>243</sup>. The narrative progresses through associations, advancements, and regressions beginning at any point along the chronological axis; we are in the space Nancy labelled "renvoi" (return/ send back/ repeat). It is a relational and mobile dimension, the only space in which the subject encounters themselves and recognises themselves: «[i]t is a present in waves on a swell, not in a point on a line; it is a time that opens up, that is hollowed out, that is enlarged or ramified, that envelops or separates, that becomes or is turned into a loop, that stretches out or contracts, and so on»<sup>244</sup>.

#### • The subject as echo-chamber

According to what Philippe Lejeune writes in *Les broullons de soi*: «One of the most important lessons of childhood is narrative identity: knowing how to say "I," constructing a story, and having one's own

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>242</sup> «le récit autobiographique contemporain se morcelle de plus en plus: les textes privilégient souvent tel ou tel "événement" […] La linéarité du trajet s'est perdue au profit de la captation des instants» Dominique Viart and Bruno Vercier, op. cit., p. 51.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>243</sup> «Salti diacronici, sfasature di piani temporali, contaminazioni intenzionali fra tempo della storia e tempo del discorso privilegiano la dimensione autocosciente, metanarrativa, di un genere per definizione fluido che si interroga costantemente sul proprio statuto di veridicità e sui propri codici di definizione» Sergio Zatti, art. cit., p.54.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>244</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, *Listening*, op. cit. p. 13.

founding myths and value system»<sup>245</sup>. According to Sergio Zatti, when it comes to the evolution of the autobiographical genre between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries: «childhood memory, the more it emphasizes the singularity of the individual, tends to assert itself to the detriment of genealogy and lineage within which the history of the self is rooted»<sup>246</sup>. This is clearly a cultural-based phenomenon, as «underlying the abolition of genealogy is the idea that the bourgeois individual is self-generated, and the memory of childhood is the expression of a singularity that has no models just as it has no progenitors»<sup>247</sup>. As we have seen, this system fails in the twentieth century. This phenomenon is related to a larger cultural and anthropological paradigm shift, namely the transition from a metaphysical and theological (or teleological) framework to a historical (and genealogical) one. In a post-metaphysical vision, the essential truth of the individual must be found in its historicality. Twentieth-century writers of autobiography must struggle against the mismatch between the subject who has lived and the subject who is writing<sup>248</sup>. Identity, therefore, becomes

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>245</sup> «Un des apprentissages essentiels de la petite enfance est celui de l'identité narrative: savoir dire "je", se construire une histoire, avoir ses mythes fondateurs et son système de valeurs» Philippe Lejeune, *Les Brouillons de soi*, Éditions du Seuil, Paris, 1998, p. 7.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>246</sup> «il ricordo d'infanzia, quanto più enfatizza la singolarità dell'individuo, tende ad affermarsi a discapito di genealogia e discendenza dentro cui la storia dell'io affonda le sue radici» Sergio Zatti, art. cit., p. 33.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>247</sup> «dietro l'abolizione della genealogia è sottesa l'idea che l'individuo borghese si genera da sé, e il ricordo d'infanzia è l'espressione di una singolarità che non ha modelli così come non ha progenitori» Sergio Zatti, art. cit., p. 34.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>248</sup> As Bella Brodzki notes: «Whether male or female, the autobiographer is always a displaced person. To speak and write from the space marked self-referential is to inhabit, in ontological, epistemological, and discursive terms, no place. Nothing but the rhetorical nature of literary language (and our desire to have all autobiographical acts be perforce performative utterances) guarantees the self-authenticating simpler mode of referentiality that autobiography is assumed at once to depend upon and to provide. Of all literary genrse, autobiography is the most precariously poised between narrative and discourse or history and rhetoric» Bella

multiple. This process, according to Viart and Vercier, often leads to a shift «from interiority to anteriority»<sup>249</sup>, and writers «know who they are by questioning what they inherited»<sup>250</sup>. The *écriture de soi* is increasingly resembling the *récit de filiation*. If we take what Derrida states in *Spectres de Marx* as true, i.e., «faire sa propre histore n'est possible qu'a condition de l'heritage», then the autobiograpy becomes an enterprise in which the author tries to «savoir *qui* on est en interrogeant ce dont on *hérite*»<sup>251</sup>. According to

Brodzki, *Mothers, Displacement and Language*, in: Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, *Women, Autobiography and Theory: A Reader*, The University of Winsconsin Press, 1998, pp. 156-159, p. 156.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>249</sup> Dominique Viart and Bruno Vercier, op. cit., p. 82.

<sup>250</sup> Ibid

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>251</sup> In her study on the genre of "memorie di famiglia," Elisabetta Abignente questions the genre's significance in contemporary culture. According to the scholar, in a time of profound rethinking of parental ties, in a fluid space characterized by flexible and mobile roots, it is precisely the rethinking of the family institution, free of any easy automatism, that would generate a renewed questioning of one's roots. Looking at the literary genre through a Freudian lens, the scholar discusses the attempt to strike a balance between two contradictory instances: «da un lato la frammentarietà dell'organismo familiare e la messa in discussione nella realtà quotidiana dell'identificazione tra dimora e parentela, dall'altra il riemergere della cellula familiare come strumento di comprensione e di rappresentazione della realtà, di fatto difficilmente sostituibile con altri. Il recupero memoriale delle proprie origini potrebbe essere letto anche come la ricerca di un punto di approdo in un'epoca che vede progressivamente sgretolarsi i confini tra vita pubblica e vita privata, generando un continuo senso di disappartenenza e spaesamento Cercare rifugio tra le pareti domestiche o nel proprio albero genealogico assume in questo senso un valore terapeutico e si offre come una forma di compensazione rispetto all'incertezza del presente» [On the one hand, the fragmentary nature of the family unit and the daily questioning of the identification between home and kinship, and on the other, the re-emergence of the family unit as a tool for understanding and representing reality, which is difficult to replace with others. The memorial recovery of one's own origins could also be read as a search for a point of landing in an era in which the boundaries between public and private life are gradually eroding, resulting in a constant sense of disenfranchisement and disorientation. In this sense, seeking refuge within one's own home or within one's family tree has therapeutic value and serves as a form of compensation for the

Viart and Vercier: «the story of the other – the father, mother, or a specific ancestor – is a necessary step toward reaching oneself, understanding oneself in this heritage»<sup>252</sup>. Elisabetta Abignente goes on to say that the descendant and author of the story's interiority emerges as a kind of palimpsest in which the traces of previous existences, as well as the individuals who generated them, remain inscribed<sup>253</sup>. In this process – as we tried to demonstrate through Plínio Prado's theories – the acoustic dimension of memory assumes a role of primary importance, as the subject becomes an echo-chamber for the voices of the past, as Burlot states: «the

uncertainty of the present] Elisabetta Abignente, *Rami nel tempo. Memorie di famiglia e romanzo contemporaneo*, Donzelli Editore, Roma, 2021, pp. 20-21.

<sup>252</sup> «le récit de l'autre – le père, la mère ou tel aïeul – est le détour nécessaire pour parvenir à soi, pour se comprendre dans cet héritage» Dominique Viart and Bruno Vercier, op. cit., p. 80. The scholars state: «Proches à la fois de la psychanalise et du conte philosophique [...] ces textes montrent bien à quel point le sujet contemporain se sent rendevable d'un héritage dont il n'a pas véritablement pris la mesure et qu'il s'obstine à evaluer, à comprendre, voire à récuser. [...] les figures paternelles et maternelles se dérobent au récit et impriment à la langue même une défiguration telle que l'écriture s'en trouve perturbée, et perturbante. Le sujet contemporain s'appréhende comme celui à qui son passé fait défaut, constat qui invalide la conscience sûre de soi et favorise les égarements identitaires. L'autobiographie, si violemment remise en question [...] impose au-delà de l'impossible récit de soi, le nécessaire récit des autres avant soi. Le récit de filiation, qu'il prenne forme autobiographique ou fictive, est donc le mode privilégié d'écriture du sujet» [Closely related to both psychoanalysis and the philosophical tale [...], these texts demonstrate the extent to which the contemporary subject feels indebted to an inheritance that they have not fully considered and that they insist on evaluating, understanding, and even denying. [...] The father and mother characters evade the narrative and disfigure the language itself to the point where writing is disturbed and disturbing. The contemporary subject is perceived as lacking in their past, an observation that invalidates the certain consciousness of the self and favours a misguided identity. Autobiography, which has been so harshly criticised, imposes, in addition to the impossible narrative of the self, the necessary narrative of others before the self. The récit de filiation, whether autobiographical or fictional, is thus the privileged mode of writing about the subject Dominique Viart and Bruno Vercier, op. cit., pp. 91-92.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>253</sup> Elisabetta Abignente, op. cit., p. 103.

human subject is formed for an essential part in a sound heritage made of these voices, words, intonations, and enunciations»<sup>254</sup>.

As Marianne Hirsch notes, in the second half of the twentieth century, there are some parallels in the representations of subject formation (above all in a feminist perspective) and «the impetus to return to a preoedipal, pre-verbal moment of origin which, though virtually unavailable to language and memory, nevertheless is meant to provide an instrument for binding the fragments of self»<sup>255</sup>.

### • In search of lost language

According to Paul John Eakin, autobiography is a type of self-invention at the moment of writing that parallels the individual's access to identity at the moment of acquisition of language: «the writing of autobiography», argues Eakin «emerges as a symbolic analogue to the initial coming together of the individual and language that marks the origin of self-awareness»<sup>256</sup>. It is my argument that, on the contrary, oto-bio-graphy's drive is mainly to return to a time when language had not yet been acquired.

The word *infans* designates the "speechless". The child has a voice, but has no language, this «voix comme timbre, Aristote l'appelait *phônè*»<sup>257</sup>. It can manifest an emotional state: «*In-fans*, cela a de la voix, mais n'articule pas. Non référentielle et inadressée, la phrase infantile est signal

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>254</sup> «Le sujet humain se forme pour une parte essentielle dans un heritage sonore fait de ces voix, mots, intonations et énonciations» Gilles Bourlot, art. cit., p. 11.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>255</sup> Marianne Hirsch, *The Mother-Daughter Plot*, op. cit., p. 130.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>256</sup> John Paul Eakin, *Fictions in Autobiograph. Studies in the Art of Self-Invention*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1985, p. 213. A similar theory is the one presented by Karen Haddad-Wotling in *L'enfant qui a failli se taire: essai sur l'écriture autobiographique*, Champion, Paris, 2004.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>257</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, *Lectures d'enfance*, op. cit., p. 133.

affectuel, plaisir, douleur»<sup>258</sup>. This voice, which is more sensitive than intellectual, cannot be fixed in the discourse: it comes close to a sob, a burst of laughter or a moan that fades away before we can define its outline. On the other hand, *logos*, insofar as it is an articulated voice and a vehicle of meaning, characterises the discourse of the adult. But there is something that inflects the discourse, gives it an ambiguous appearance, an indefinable tone. This "something" is the "child" hidden deep inside the adult discourse; it is the *phônè* incessantly watching for the clear articulation of the *logos*. As Lyotard puts it: «la voix inarticulée timbre la voix articulée»<sup>259</sup>.

As we saw with Proust's crucial scene of the mother's reading, the idea of childhood as a pre-subjective psychic substance is as much a myth as the idea of a pre-linguistic subject, and childhood and language refer to each other in a circle in which childhood is the origin of language and language is the origin of childhood. In this context, the child's sensory experience becomes the protagonist of self-narrative. Writing draws on a domain that was devoid of the adult self (and its logical organisation of experience). Self-narrative thus becomes the «place in which a researcher tries to create a foreign language within their own language. Ethical disposition: listening to this other stranger within oneself, which gives rise to a secret and intimate voice infused in the tone of a style»<sup>260</sup>. The autobiographer derives contrastive meaning effects from the discordance of sensory and theoretical world, of impression and knowledge, aware that the retrospective effect produced by adult reason imposes the use of a language when describing what is pre-logical and preverbal. As Marianne Hirsch puts it: «the semiotic

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>258</sup> Ibid., p. 138.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>259</sup> Ibid.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>260</sup> «lieu dans lequel un chercheur tâche de créer une langue étrangère dans sa propre langue. Disposition éthique: l'écoute de cet autre étranger au-dedans, à l'origine d'une voix secrète et intime, insufflée dans le ton d'un style» Denis Viennet, art. cit., p. 29.

is pre-oedipal, chronologically anterior to syntax, a cry, the gesture of a child. In adult discourse it is rhythm, prosody, pun, non-sense, laugh»<sup>261</sup>.

In this context, the symbolic element of the mother's voice acquires a special signification. As we saw, in logocentric (phallogocentric) thinking, the female is identified with what lies beyond the space circumscribed by symbolic discourse. Kaja Silvermann, in her book *The Acoustic Mirror*, makes the point that the maternal voice is always already marked by lack, cleavage, separation; that is, it is fantasised from the standpoint of the symbolic, at a time when it is already lost and irrecoverable. As part of the lost primary object, it represents that, the recovery of which would repair all loss. Silverman's thesis therefore is that the maternal voice has been fantasised — both negatively and positively — in the culture, and that this fantasy is simply echoed in the writings of cultural theorists, philosophers, and psychoanalysts. As Mary Noonan notes:

The maternal voice is marked by castration anxiety because it signifies (a) the differentiation of subject from object, and the loss of imaginary plenitude; (b) the fact that the symbolic order precedes the subject, providing it with readymade desires and meanings; and (c) the cleavage that separates the speaking subject from the subject of its speech, 'a cleavage which is nowhere in greater evidence than at the site of the voice itself, vehicle of both the cry and the word': in its fantasmatic guise as 'pure' sonorousness, the maternal voice oscillates between two poles; it is either cherished as the objet (a) — as what can make good all lacks — or despised and jettisoned as what is most abject, most culturally intolerable — as the forced representative of

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>261</sup> Marianne Hirsch, op. cit., p. 210.

everything within male subjectivity which is incompatible with the phallic function, and which threatens to expose discursive mastery as an impossible ideal<sup>262</sup>

It will be my argument in Chapter 4 that Elias Canetti, Natalia Ginzburg and Nathalie Sarraute, precisely attempt to make one feel, in the form of the self-narrative, which is a form of discourse, the pre-verbal intonation, the infantile voice, its resonances, and its unpredictable drives. It is a two-way endeavour that results in a contradictory device. On the one hand, discourse elaboration; on the other, disarticulation at the lexical, syntactic, and narrative levels. The inherent tension of the text is created by an oxymoronic economy, which connects these two opposing forces.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>262</sup> Mary Noonan, op. cit., p. 86.

## 3. THE SCHOOL OF SILENCE

# 3.1. Our corpus

As I briefly mentioned in the introduction of this work, the idea to conduct a research on the connection between hearing and self-narrative came from some readings in which I noticed the presence of a great number of acoustic memories. Nonetheless, as I hope to have clarified, the aim of this study is to identify works in which acoustic perception is not relegated to the role of an episode, an accessory or decorative element, but rather interacts – directly or indirectly – with all levels of discourse, from the stylistic to the metaphorical one. Far from providing a phenomenology of listening in autobiographical writing, it is the aspect of listening, so to speak, that I have confronted, identifying in the works of Elias Canetti, Natalia Ginzburg and Nathalie Sarraute – the materialisation of an otobiographical approach to the narrative of the self.

### 3.1.1 Nathalie Sarraute

In a 1977 interview, Nathalie Sarraute stated: «I always say I don't have a biography. Biography is nothing»<sup>263</sup>. In another interview she added that: «explaining the work [of an artist] through the life seems totally

<sup>263</sup> "Biographie: Nathalie Sarraute," interview with Viviane Forrester, France Culture, 4 February 1977, quoted in: Ann Jefferson, *Nathalie Sarraute. A Life Between*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, Ebook.

aberrant to me»<sup>264</sup>. According to Nathalie Sarraute's biographer Ann Jefferson, the writer's hostility to biographical reconstructions is a common characteristic of many authors belonging to the generation that followed Roland Barthes' pronouncement of the "death of the author" and who grew up under the tutelage of Prous's "against Sainte-Beuve" and the practice of reading literature through the lens of the author's life<sup>265</sup>. Jefferson also traces the author's hostility against a unitary concept of identity to certain events that marked her existence:

Having grown up in France as the daughter of émigré Russian Jews, Nathalie Sarraute knew only too well how labels that fix an identity – whether foreign, Jewish, or female – can be used to segregate and exclude. For all these reasons, biography was bound to appear as a negation of her own experience and the convictions that underpinned her writing. She was always adamant that, while her writing was true to her own inward psychological experience – where life is lived from moment to moment and where no individual can be reduced to a single identity – she never portrayed the external events of her life in her work<sup>266</sup>

Indeed, the author's entire oeuvre is characterised by the idea of an identity that is never fixed, but mutable and fluid.

Nathalie Sarraute (1900-1999) is a French Jewish author of Russian origin (her real name is indeed Natal'ja Černjak). She was born in 1900 in Ivanovo-Voznessenk (near Moscow) into a wealthy and intellectual family.

<sup>266</sup> Ibid.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>264</sup> "Magny, "Entretiens avec Nathalie Sarraute," in reply to the question, "Can you imagine someone writing your biography one day?", quoted in: Ann Jefferson, op. cit., Ebook.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>265</sup> Ibid.

She stayed in Russia until 1902, when her parents divorced. Then her mother moved to Paris with her and her future husband. During the first years of her life, Nathalie spent one month a year with her father, either in Ivanovo or in Switzerland. She then studied English and history at Oxford, sociology in Berlin, and law in Paris before going on to practice law, and eventually start her literary career<sup>267</sup>. She lived the entire twentieth century, being born a few months after the century began and dying a few months before it ended, and she was affected by some of the century's major historical events, including the First World War, the Russian Revolution, the Second World War, and the German Occupation of France, as well as the social transformations that had such an impact on women's lives. She lived a cosmopolitan life, she spoke four languages and travelled through Europe, Russia, and the U.S. through her whole life. If «impermanence was written into her childhood from the start»<sup>268</sup>, the term "impermanence" applies to her career as well. She was associated with some of the most important cultural figures and literary movements in twentieth-century France, from Sartre and Les Temps Modernes to Robbe-Grillet and the Nouveau Roman, but she always chose to forge her own path. Despite her connections to many worlds, she was never fully a part of any of them. Her self-chosen position was always at odds or to one side, and it was usually "between" 269 rather than "within". In terms of her literary vocation, Sarraute has never wanted to explain how it began or how it evolved. Sometimes she claimed that she had not considered writing for many years, while other times she claimed that the desire to write had present since her childhood, but that she had found «neither subject matter nor form that belonged to me and

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>267</sup> All the information about Nathalie Sarraute's life are from Ann Jefferson, op. cit., and Monique Gosselin, *Enfance de Nathalie Sarraute*, Gallimard, Paris, 1996, pp. 183-188.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>268</sup> Ann Jefferson, op. cit., Ebook.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>269</sup> We are here referring to the title chosen by Jefferson for Sarraute biography, "A Life between".

motivated me to write»<sup>270</sup>. In the 1920s, Sarraute became interested in literature. During these years, she read the authors who would inspire her the most: Woolf, Joyce, and Proust. Modernist literature inspired her and made her consider her relationship with literature as well as her writing style. Reading these authors made her realise that the nature of the novel had changed, and she found herself with nothing to write about, so she kept silent:

It was a time when the novel seemed to be dead – at least the traditional novel. [...] As for me, after reading Proust and Joyce, which I did between 1922 and 1924, and then reading Virginia Woolf, I felt that it was no longer possible to write as people had done previously and so, since I couldn't find anything to write about, I didn't write<sup>271</sup>

Indeed, Sarraute did not begin writing until 1932, at the age thirty-two. Her first book, *Tropismes*, appeared in 1939. Despite being praised by Jean-Paul Sartre and Max Jacob, the book received little attention from literary critics or the public. Sarraute was disbarred in 1940 because of anti-Jewish legislation and – during the Paris Nazi occupation – decided to devote herself to literature. In 1948, she published *Portrait d'un inconnu*, which Sartre edited and prefaced. Shortly after, her second novel, *Martereau* (1953), and her critical essay, *L'ère du soupçon* (1956), brought

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 $<sup>^{270}</sup>$  "Interview with Diana Mihajlova", cit. in: Ann Jefferson, op. cit., Ebook.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>271</sup> Germaine Brée, "Interview with two French novelists: Natalie Saraute and Célia Bertir", Contemporary Literature, Spring 1973, Volume 14, n. 2., cit in: Robert G. Boatright, Helen Southworth, *The Intersecting Realities and Fictions of Virginia Woolf and Colette*, The Ohio State University Press, Columbus, 2004, p. 125.

her significant literary recognition. In L'ère du soupçon, Sarraute challenged the traditional conventions of the novel. She became a leading figure in the Nouveau Roman movement, along with Alain Robbe-Grillet, Michel Butor, and Claude Simon, a rather heterogeneous movement whose positions were a rejection of the modern narrative inherited from the nineteenth century and a concern for formal research. In the 1960s Sarraute began writing radio plays which were later scripted for the stage (Le Silence (1964), Le Mensonge (1966), Isma, ou ce qui s'appelle rien (1970) et C'est beau (1972)). She wrote until her death, with her last work published in 1997, Ouvrez. With more than twenty works, Sarraute leaves us a rich legacy of very diverse works, all oriented in the search for tropisms, those barely perceptible movement that should provoke intense sensations in the reader.

### 3.1.2 Natalia Ginzburg

Natalia Ginzburg's work and life, as Fabio Vasarri notes, have some elements in common with Nathalie Sarraute, elements that should not, however, risk inducing an easy comparison:

Any comparison between Nathalie Sarraute and Natalia Ginzburg entails risks due to both profound differences and striking analogies that one suspects they may turn out to be misleading. Both writers work with the chatty, the everyday and the banal. They both had Jewish fathers and partners and experienced racial persecution. The first, by birth, and the second, through her connection with Leone Ginzburg, were nourished by Russian literature, particularly Chekhov. Both have assimilated Ivy Compton-Burnett's lesson on the potential of the dialogue in text, a decisive lesson also in dramaturgy. Both novelists came to playwriting at a mature age, in the 1960s, responding to external stimuli and fighting against strong resistance and internal doubts. Having overcome the latter, they

continued to write plays alternating with narrative works. They even achieved public success in similar circumstances, reworking their childhood memories in the separate formulations of *Lessico famigliare* and *Enfance*. The distances derive mainly from Sarraute's intransigent avant-garde commitment and her involvement in the "nouveau roman". And, symmetrically, from Ginzburg's option of realistic concreteness, an author faithful to a transitive and communicative idea of literature and distrustful of the avant-garde. But even on the level of divergences one runs the risk of being dazzled and misled. As Cesare Garboli has suggested, Ginzburg's production is not a neo-realist monolith, but a mobile agglomeration subject to changes and experimentation with different techniques<sup>272</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>272</sup> «Ogni confronto tra Nathalie Sarraute e Natalia Ginzburg comporta dei rischi dovuti sia a profonde differenze sia ad analogie così vistose che si sospetta possano rivelarsi ingannevoli. Entrambe le scrittrici lavorano sulla chiacchiera, sul quotidiano e sul banale. Entrambe hanno avuto un padre e un compagno ebrei, e hanno conosciuto la persecuzione razziale. Sia la prima, per nascita, che la seconda, per il legame con Leone Ginzburg, si sono nutrite di letteratura russa, in particolare di Čechov. Tutte e due hanno assimilato la lezione di Ivy Compton-Burnett sulle potenzialità del testo dialogato, lezione decisiva anche in sede drammaturgica. L'una e l'altra romanziera sono arrivate alla scrittura teatrale in età matura, negli anni Sessanta del Novecento, rispondendo a sollecitazioni esterne e combattendo contro forti resistenze e dubbi interni. Superati questi ultimi, hanno continuato a scrivere commedie alternandole alle opere narrative. Hanno perfino raggiunto il successo di pubblico in circostanze analoghe, rielaborando i loro ricordi infantili nelle formulazioni distinte di Lessico famigliare e di Enfance. Le distanze derivano soprattutto dall'intransigente impegno avanguardistico di Sarraute e dal suo coinvolgimento nel "nouveau roman". E, simmetricamente, dall'opzione di concretezza realistica di Ginzburg, autrice fedele a un'idea transitiva e comunicativa della letteratura e diffidente delle avanguardie. Ma anche sul piano delle divergenze si rischia di essere abbagliati e fuorviati. Come ha suggerito Cesare Garboli, la produzione ginzburghiana non è un monolito neorealista, ma un agglomerato mobile sottoposto a cambiamenti di rotta e a sperimentazioni di tecniche diverse» Fabio Vasarri, «Due silenzi a teatro (Sarraute,

Indeed, Ginzburg's oeuvre consists mainly of short stories, novels, plays and essays. In her biography of the writer, scholar Sandra Petrignani calls Ginzburg's life and work a "constellation", as:

Natalia is a "constellation", a narrator, essayist, and paywriter whose story is intertwined with the history of our country (from the great anti-fascist Turin where, almost by chance, the Einaudi publishing house was born in an attic, to the progressive crumbling of Resistance and left-wing values. Her destiny was both romantic and exciting: she was the only woman in a male universe to share a publishing and cultural power that had previously excluded women in Italy<sup>273</sup>

Petrignani emphasises the importance of Natalia Ginzburg not only as a writer, but also as an anti-fascist intellectual and publisher. Natalia Levi was born in Palermo in 1916. She is the last of five siblings<sup>274</sup>. Her mother,

Ginzburg)», *Rhesis. International Journal of Linguistics, Philology and Literature*, vol. 4, n. 2, 2013, pp. 356-380, p. 356.

<sup>273</sup> «Narratrice, saggista, commediografa, Natalia è una "costellazione" e la sua vicenda s'intreccia alla storia del nostro paese (dalla grande Torino antifascista dove quasi per caso, in un sottotetto, nacque la casa editrice Einaudi, fino al progressivo sgretolarsi dei valori resistenziali e della sinistra). Un destino romanzesco e appassionante il suo: unica donna in un universo maschile a condividere un potere editoriale e culturale che in Italia escludeva completamente la parte femminile» Sandra Pertignani, *La corsara. Ritratto di Natalia Ginzburg*, Neri Pozza, Vicenza, 2018, Ebook.

<sup>274</sup> As Clementelli notes, being "the little one of the house" will also influence Ginzburg's work, since, during her childhood: «Natalia avverte e scava dentro di sé un solco di solitudine, proiettandolo in un fervore di immaginazione, in una febbre di fantasie in cui una congenita attitudine a penetrare a fondo le cose e le loro ragioni si acuisce e si esaspera, rafforzando al tempo stesso la tendenza a quell'indagine della propria personalità su cui tutta la sua opera di scrittrice si svilupperà più tardi» [Natalia detects and excavates a furrow of loneliness within herself, projecting it into a fervour of imagination, a fever of fantasies in which a congenital aptitude for penetrating things and their reasons deepens and

Lidia Tanzi, is from Milan and from a Catholic family while her father, Giuseppe Levi, is from Trieste and from a Jewish family. Natalia spent her childhood and adolescence in Turin<sup>275</sup>. As a child, Ginzburg lives sheltered but solitary, partly because she does not attend primary school. She likes to read and especially loves – just like Sarraute – the great Russian writers<sup>276</sup>. Being gifted with a keen power of observation, she soon begins to write poems and short stories drawing inspiration from the gestures and words of the people around her. It is precisely childhood and adolescence that will form the core of her future masterpiece, *Lessico famigliare*. The writer also grew up in a secular and anti-fascist environment. Indeed, during Natalia's childhood, illustrious figures from the Piemontese intellectual milieu passed through the Levi household, while her father and three brothers were imprisoned on anti-fascism charges. The bourgeois and socialist milieu she grew up with was regarded as totally unpromising for a writer<sup>277</sup>. Ginzburg

exasperates, while reinforcing the tendency to that investigation of her own personality on which all her work as a writer would later develop] Elena Clementelli, *Invito alla lettura di Natalia Ginzburg*, Mursia, Milano, 1972, p. 21.

<sup>275</sup> It is this and a few other pieces of information that Ginzburg considers essential to her own biography, as she expresses in *Autobiografia in terza persona*, in: Id., *Non possiamo saperlo. Saggi 1973-1990*, Einaudi, Torino, 2001. In addition to *Lessico famigliare*, Ginzburg recounts some episodes of her childhood and early-adolescence in later short stories such as *I baffi bianchi* and *Luna pallidassi* in: Id., *Mai devi domandarmi*, Einaudi, Torino 1970.

<sup>276</sup> «Il mio nume era Čechov avevo però altri innumerevoli numi, anch'essi mi accompagnavano dal mattino alla sera, protettori e interlocutori invisibili a cui sottoponevo e destinavo costantemente, dentro di me, non solo il mio desiderio di scrivere ma ogni mio pensiero, ogni mia azione e ogni mia abitudine» [My idol was Čhechov, but I had countless other idols, they too accompanied me from morning to night, protectors and invisible interlocutors to whom I constantly submitted and destined, within myself, not only my desire to write but every thought, every action and every habit] Nota del 1964, in: Natalia Ginzburg, *Opere, raccolte e ordinate dall'autore. Volume 1*, Milano, Mondadori, 1986, p. 115.

<sup>277</sup> See: Donald Heiney, «Natalia Ginzburg. The fabric of Voices», *The Iowa Review*, vol. 1, n. 4, 1970, pp. 87-93 and Elisabetta Abignente, *Una classe inadatta a generare scrittori. Natalia Ginzburg. Lessico Famigliare* in: Francesco

wrote her first real short stories in 1933, the same year the Einaudi publishing house was founded in Turin. During those years, she developed friendships with Turin's leading anti-fascists, particularly the Einaudi publishing house's intellectuals<sup>278</sup>. Her life was marred by the most painful personal tragedy: the war dispersed her family, her husband Leone Ginzburg was murdered in jail by Nazis, and her long-time friend Pavese committed suicide. Despite this, her writing, as intimate as it is, only mentions these events in passing, never losing a sense of humour, even when tinged with melancholy. Having experienced first-hand the dramatic events and transformations of the last century, Ginzburg is a twentieth-century author par excellence: the advent of fascism, the Second World War, post-war trauma and alienation, the consumerist society, and the breakdown of traditional values are reflected in her work. Not infrequently, these typically twentieth-century themes are translated into a series of conflicts between the individual and the collective (be it society or the family); the present and the past; youth and old age; the city and the countryside; the everyday and historical events; language and silence. Ginzburg's work has been the subject of numerous Italian and international studies. Family and gender roles, memory, childhood, war, and language are among the topics covered<sup>279</sup>. Many scholars have been intrigued by the writer's works' relationship to memory, autobiography, fiction, and history. An equally

de Cristofaro and Marco Viscardi (eds.), *Il Borghese fa il mondo*, Donzelli, Roma, 2017, pp. 291-299.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>278</sup> Natalia Ginzburg's experiences at the Einaudi publishing house are recorded in the essay *Memoria contro Memoria* in: Id., *Non possiamo saperlo* op. cit.

Along these lines of research, see: Nadia Castronuovo, *Natalia Ginzburg. Jewishness as Moral Identity*, Troubadour, Leicester, 2010. On family and gender, see: Teresa Picarazzi, *Maternal Desire: Natalia Ginzburg's Mothers, Daughters and Sisters*, Farleigh Dickinson University Press, Vancouver, 2002.

successful field of investigation has been that of the silences and omissions<sup>280</sup>, as well as the forms of self-representation by the writer<sup>281</sup>.

### 3.1.3 Elias Canetti

Similarly to Natalia Ginzburg and Nathalie Sarraute, Elias Canetti witnessed some of the twentieth century's most tragic events, becoming, by his own admission, their analyst and chronicler<sup>282</sup>. A Sephardic Jew, born in Roustchouk, Bulgaria, he grew up a polyglot and a student of world cultures. Born in 1905, Canetti had a childhood rich in displacements. Vienna, where both his parents met and fell in love, was the mental capital of all the other places, which included England, where his family moved when Canetti was six; Lausanne and Zurich, where he had some of his schooling; and some sojourns in Berlin. It was to Vienna that his mother brought Canetti and his two younger brothers after his father died in Manchester in 1912, and from there that Canetti emigrated in 1938, spending a year in Paris and then moving to London, where he has lived ever since. Already from childhood, Canetti was exposed to several languages: Ladin, Bulgarian and Turkish, English, and French, but only

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>280</sup> On this aspect see: Judith Wolf, «Silent Witness: Memory and Omission in Natalia Ginzburg's Family Sayings», *The Cambridge Quarterly*, vol. 25, n.3, 1996, pp. 243-262. And Nicoletta Simborowski, «Music and Memory in Natalia Ginzburg's Lessico famigliare», *The Modern Language Review*, vol. 94, n. 3, 1999, pp. 680-690.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>281</sup> See Melissa Coburn, «Resistance-at-Risk: The Critique of Fascism and the Ethics of Writing in Natalia Ginzburg's *Lessico famigliare*», *Italica*, vol. 84, n. 4, 2007, pp. 775-769.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>282</sup> As he himself had explained to his publisher when sending him the manuscript of *Masse und Macht*, his intention was «dieses Jahrhundert and der Gurgel zu packen» [to grab the century by the throat] Elias Canetti (1973), *Die Provinz des Menschen. Aufzeichnungen 1942-1972*, Fischer, 1989, p. 204.

German was always used for writing<sup>283</sup>. This was the secret language used by his parents to recall their university days in Vienna. The intimacy of these moments, filtered through the mute words of an unknown language, couldn't help but make the young Elias feel excluded while also instilling in him a burning desire to be initiated into that language, to which he remained faithful in writing in all the European cities that became a kind of second homeland for him. Canetti's concept of homeland and belonging, as several critics have pointed out, is always linked to the German language<sup>284</sup>. As Susan Sontag states on this subject:

He has, almost by birth right, the exile writer's easily generalized relation to place: a place is a language. And knowing many languages is a way of claiming many places as one's territory. Family example (his paternal grandfather boasted of knowing seventeen languages), the local medley (in the Danube port city where he was born, Canetti says, one could hear seven or eight languages spoken every day), and the velocity of his childhood all facilitated an avid relation to

As a matter of fact, Canetti had drawn a connection between the language of his spirit and belonging to the Jewish community in a note transcribed in 1944. Canetti's choice to maintain German as his literary language throughout his life is thus explained by the writer himself: «Die Sprache mines Geistes wird die deutsche beliben, und zwar weil ich Jude bin. Was von dem auf jede Weise verheerten Land übrig bleibt, will ich als Jude in mir behüten. Auch *ihr* Schicksal ist meines; aber ich bringe noch ein allgemein menschliches Erbteil mit. Ich will ihrer Sprache zurückgeben, was ich ihr schulde. Ich will dazu beitragen, daß man ihnen für etwas Dank hat» [The language of my spirit will continue to be German, and precisely because I am Jewish. What remains of that land devastated in every possible way, I want to keep it in me, as a Jew. Its fate is also mine; however, I still carry within me a universally human inheritance. I want to give back to their language what I owe it. I want in this way contribute to being grateful to them for something.] Elias Canetti (1973), *Die Provinz des Menschen*, op. cit., p. 63.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>284</sup> On this topic see: Yaier Cohen, «Elias Canetti: Exile and the German Language», *German Life and Letters*, vol. 42. n. 1, 1988, pp. 32-45.

language. To live was to acquire languages – his were Ladino, Bulgarian, German (the language his parents spoke to each other), English, French – and be "everywhere"<sup>285</sup>

While German was always his writing language, Canetti experimented with a variety of genres and forms of expression throughout his intellectual career. Canetti's body of work – devoted to the research of a few great obsessions such as power, mass, and death – is a complex jumble of essays, notes, aphorisms, a novel, a few plays, and three autobiographical volumes. They are all hybrid texts that blur the lines between philosophy, anthropology, and literature, making it difficult to attribute the author to a doctrine or even an epistemology. The author's production was carried out with what he himself referred to as "the horse's move," i. e. the deliberate rejection of any criteria of systematicity or defined method and the willingness to approach problems from unusual angles by extending the work over years without imposing any time constraints on himself «so daß dem Weltlauf jede Gelegenheit gegeben ist, diese Entdeckungen und einen selber zu widerlegen oder zu zerbrechen»<sup>286</sup>. Even though his oeuvre includes so many different genres, Canetti tormented himself in his final years as a "Dichter ohne Werk". Sontag defines Canetti «an eternal student»<sup>287</sup>, relying on his observations and inspirations from other outsiders to the literary scene. Canetti's work has an unmistakable character because of the author's distance from party politics and popular ideologies in an era dominated by collectivism and ideologies such as nationalism, communism, and fascism. Instead, he relied on his own observations and assessments, and he chose his friends and role models based on how they appealed to him

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>285</sup> Susan Sontag, *Elias Canetti*, Granta [online] <a href="https://granta.com/canetti/granta.com/canetti/">https://granta.com/canetti/granta.co

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>286</sup> [so that the course of the world is given the opportunity to disprove or destroy these discoveries or the discoverer himself] Elias Canetti, op. cit., p. 134.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>287</sup> Susan Sontag, *Elias Canetti*, art. cit., [online].

rather than their public acclaim. Furthermore, Canetti closely observed mass events and social phenomena that shaped his time. According to Claudio Magris, with his ability to grasp History in its immediate impulses, Canetti is «a classical writer, who masters totality and knows impassive detachment, also sculpted in the dry mathematics of his prose»<sup>288</sup>. The scholar believes this is a legacy of the «the ethical-scientific tradition of Austrian narrative, aimed at the encyclopaedic survey of reality and the universal classification; in this sense the writer is the last great survivor of that Central European civilisation, which in the period between the two world wars had transformed literature into a glossary of contemporary delirium and a rigorous cognitive operation»<sup>289</sup>. However, reducing the author to the image of the last representative of the great Viennese literary season is reductive, as he is neither a representative of a country nor of a single genre of writing. Due to the different historical events, the horrors experienced by his generation, the different seasons of his education and the different languages he learnt, the oblivion and the late, paradoxical rediscovery of his work have a character that is both exemplary and eccentric and has allowed him to weave centrifugal multiplicity and stubborn unity into his existence, becoming a «a living oxymoron. He is both the great poet of the divided self and one of the most integral and complete personalities of our time»<sup>290</sup>.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>288</sup> «uno scrittore classico, che padroneggia la totalità e conosce l'impassibile distacco, scolpito anche nell'asciutta matematica della sua prosa» Claudio Magris, *L'anello di Clarisse: Grande stile e nichilismo nella letteratura moderna*, Einaudi, Torino, 1974, p. 281.

<sup>«</sup>tradizione etico-scientifica della narrativa austriaca, tesa al catasto enciclopedico del reale e al dizionario universale; in tal senso lo scrittore è l'ultimo grande superstite di quella civiltà mitteleuropea, che nel periodo tra le due guerre mondiali aveva trasformato la letteratura in un glossario del delirio contemporaneo e in una rigorosa operazione conoscitiva» Ibid., p. 281.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>290</sup> «Un ossimoro vivente. È insieme il grande poeta dell'io diviso ed una delle personalità più integre e complete del nostro tempo» Claudio Magris, op. cit., p. 281.

Dedicating many years of his life to the study of the power of mass dynamics, Canetti reflected at length on the concept of "individual" and the possibility of representing reality through literature. In the speech for Hermann Broch's 50th birthday, in November 1936, Canetti observed that he was living in a time:

in which we can be *amazed* at the most contrasting things: For instance at a book that has been affecting us for thousands of years, and also at the fact that not all books can affect us any longer. At the faith in gods and also at the fact that we do not kneel down to new gods every hour. At the sexuality we are afflicted with and also at the fact that this split does not reach any deeper. At death, which we do not wish, and also at the fact that we do not already die in the womb, out of grief over coming things. Astonishment *used* to be the mirror that brought phenomena to a smoother and calmer surface. Today, this mirror is shattered, and the splinters of astonishment have become small. But no phenomenon is reflected by itself in even the tiniest splinter. Ruthlessly, each phenomenon pulls its opposite along. Whatever you see and how little you see, it cancels itself out when you see it<sup>291</sup>

Canetti's evocation of the broken mirror recalls the image of the modern shattered subject who is unable to build a cohesive representation of itself<sup>292</sup>. On the on hand, this image evokes the impossibility of a single

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>291</sup> Elias Canetti, *The Conscience of Words*, Andre Deutsch, London, 1979, pp. 2-3.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>292</sup> On a similar note, in 1984, while presenting her novel *La città e la casa*, Natalia Ginzburg writes: «scrivendo romanzi, ho sempre avuto la sensazione d'avere in mano degli specchi rotti, e tuttavia sempre speravo di poter ricomporre finalmente uno specchio intiero. Ma non mi è mai successo e via via che andavo

representation, i. e., the break in the simple reflection and the consequent proliferation of viewpoints, and on the other hand it denotes the loss of a relationship of natural, unequivocal naming between words and things, i. e., the possibility for literature to translate reality without any caesuras<sup>293</sup>. While rejecting the possibility of reconstructing this mirror, which would inevitably leave visible cracks, the emphasis on visuality with the use of *Erscheinungen* speaks to the distancing, and possibly illusory nature, of the previous astonishment with the world that is based on visual experience.

Canetti thus proposes a broader aesthetic perception, an alternative that goes behind a traditional visual perspective. In this regard, Canetti refers to the "real poet" (*wahre Dichter*)<sup>294</sup>, e. g. a poet whose concern is not abstraction or definition, but instead the proximity with reality<sup>295</sup>. The

avanti a scrivere la speranza s'allontanava. Questa volta però, fin dal principio, non speravo nulla. Lo specchio era rotto e io sapevo che ricomporne i pezzi mi sarebbe stato impossibile. Non avrei avuto mai il bene di avere davanti a me uno specchio intero» [When writing novels, I always had the feeling of holding broken mirrors in my hand, and yet I always hoped that I could finally put a whole mirror back together. But it never happened, and as I went on writing, the hope faded away. This time, however, from the very beginning, I hoped for nothing. The mirror was broken and I knew that putting the pieces back together would be impossible for me. I would never have the good fortune to have a whole mirror in front of me] Natalia Ginzburg, *La città e la casa*, Einaudi, Torino, 1984, cover flap.

<sup>293</sup> In this regard, the title chosen by Joshua Cohen for the Elias Canetti Reader is particularly accurate, see: Joshua Cohen (ed.), *I Want to Keep Smashing Myself Until I'm a Whole. An Elias Canetti Reader*, Picador, London, 2022.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>294</sup> Elias Canetti, *Hermann Broch*, in: *The Conscience of Words*, op. cit.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>295</sup> Canetti was a great reader and researcher of ancient orality classics, myths, and legends, he perceived storytellers as «an enclave of ancient, untouched existence», he considered them as «elder and better brothers» Elias Canetti, *The voices of Marrakesh*, Boyars, London-Boston, 1982, p. 78. While visiting Marrakesh, Canetti suddenly feels what separates him from the storytellers of the past: it is the printed paper he has devoted himself to, it is the desks, the books, the cold and superfluous knowledge. This idea would not abandon him for some time. In 1960 he notes: «Telling stories to anyone who will hear them as stories, who doesn't know you, who doesn't expect literature. Life as a wandering storyteller

wahre Dichter therefore stands not only as the writer, but ultimately for the formation of a subject that is intimately connected to a truer reality that had been papered over with abstractions.

By reflecting on a subject which «incorporates everything he has experienced. This includes the countries where he has lived, the people whose voices he has heard»<sup>296</sup>, Canetti implicitly suggests the fundamental intersubjective reality of subjectivity itself. Canetti's theory becomes even more understandable when the writer applies it to himself. In his notes Canetti writes that «He doesn't want to describe something, he wants to be that something»<sup>297</sup>: the particularity of his reflection lies precisely in the fact that he does not relate to things from the outside, but «si pone all'ascolto di esse e ne accoglie la specificità, esige una capacità di nominazione e di descrizione, in grado di restituirle a loro stesse; e questa riflessione non può che realizzarsi attraverso la lingua e la scrittura»<sup>298</sup>. For him, the gift of embracing multiplicity and naming it is not an imitation that remains external to the object, but an actual capacity to become something else, a mythical capacity of which the writer is the ultimate custodian: that capacity

would be nice» Elias Canetti, *Notes from Hampstead*, Farrar Strauss Giroux, New York, 2005, p. 29. The trip to Marrakesh and the encounter with such an archaic and pulsating orality drive Canetti once again to a reflection on the meaning of writing and literature: «Having seldom felt at ease among the people of our zones whose life is literature – despising them because I despise something about myself, and I think that something is paper – I suddenly found myself here among authors I could look up to since there was not a line of theirs to be *read*» Elias Canetti, *The Voices of Marrakesh*, op. cit. p. 79.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>296</sup> Elias Canetti, *The Play of the Eyes*, in: *The Memoirs of Elias Canetti*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York, 1999, p. 810.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>297</sup> Elias Canetti, *Notes from Hampstead*, op. cit., p. 55.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>298</sup> [he listens to them and accepts their specificity, it demands a capacity for naming and describing them, capable of restoring them to themselves; and this reflection can only be realised through language and writing] Youssef Ishaghpour, *Elias Canetti. Metamorfosi e identità*, Bollati Boringhieri, Torino, 2005, p. 36.

he refers to as "metamorphosis". In a speech entitled *The mission of the Poet* Canetti declares:

This, I think, would be the true task of the *Dichter*. That gift, once universal, but now doomed to atrophy, has to be preserved by any means possible; and the *Dichter*, thanks to that gift, ought to keep the access *between* people open. He should be able to become *anybody and everybody*, even the smallest, the most naive, the most powerless person. His desire for experiencing others from the inside should never be determined by the goals of which our normal, virtually official life consists; that desire has to be totally free of any aim at success or prestige, it has to be passion in itself, the passion of metamorphosis<sup>299</sup>

In the 1976 speech, Canetti states that writers must feel the compelling need to immerse themselves in the experiences of men of all kinds. This process «would require an ever open ear»<sup>300</sup>. The writer must open his ears in two senses: «he will make mankind's literary heritage, so rich in metamorphoses, his own»<sup>301</sup>, a spiritual heritage that is not limited to the canonised Western one, but refers to any tradition, to the myths, the forgotten oral traditions of primitive peoples<sup>302</sup>. They are the voices of the dead, of ancestors, of predecessors, those figures that, as he often states in his notes, he took in and have never left him since. At the same time, the writer must apply metamorphosis to the world around him: he must tune

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>299</sup> Elias Canetti, *The conscience of Words*, op. cit, p. 162.

<sup>300</sup> Ibid.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>301</sup> Ibid., p. 240.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>302</sup> Antonello Lombardi conducted a long and detailed study of Canetti's library bequest, finding several volumes dedicated to ethology, and to habits and language of animals. See: Antonello Lombardi, *La scuola dell'ascolto. Oralità, suono e musica nell'opera di Elias Canetti*, UT Orhpeus, Bologna, 2011.

into the buzz of his contemporaneity and the voices of the living. It is in this attitude that the shattered and chameleon-like ego finds within itself a secret and extreme coherence, that draws nourishment from the persons he met, and which constitute his plurality. Metamorphosis and multiplicity also guide the writer's choice of knowledge fields. According to Canetti, the writer must be guided in his choices not by logic, but by an inexplicable longing: «Since he opens himself up to the most disparate people at once, understanding them in an ancient, pre-scholarly way, namely through metamorphosis, since he is thereby in a constant internal motion, which he cannot weaken or terminate [...], since he receives violent pushes from people, it is quite possible that the sudden turn to a new branch of knowledge is also determined by such encounters»<sup>303</sup>. The writer's singularity draws vigour and nourishment from these "dialogues", since, as Ezio Raimondi noted:

The writer is the custodian of metamorphosis insofar as their voice resonates in previous voices, their images are born from other images, their text always includes the literary universe in which it is constructed, and the more it reflects the literature that precedes it, the more it defines, in comparison and dialogue with tradition, its difference and its identity. The instrument of metamorphosis thus becomes memory, which preserves and innovates, repeats and at the same time transforms, in a dialectical movement in which the new is born from the past but, far from reducing itself to it, invests it with a new light<sup>304</sup>

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>303</sup> Elias Canetti, *The conscience of Words*, op. cit, p. 163.

 $<sup>^{304}</sup>$  «Lo scrittore è custode della metamorfosi nella misura in cui la sua voce risuona nelle voci precedenti, le sue immagini nascono da altre immagini, il suo

So, where is the identity of this being, this individual sensitive to the archaic plurality of the self and immersed in a continuous dialogue of voices in the Bachtinian sense? Canetti frequently asks himself this question in his diaries, looking for an order in which to recognise himself. To the question "Wo ist man nun selbst?" he answers: "Man ist in der Härte, mit der man es sieht und verzeichnet".

The connection between acoustic perception and metamorphosis is very present in Canetti, as evidenced by excerpts from the discourse on the *Beruf des Dichters*. Indeed, Canetti himself personifies the idea of a reserved character who is as sensitive as a seismograph to every sound of the era for which he is an interpreter. In his collection of Fifty Characters titled *Earwitness*, he provides a kind of self-portrait. This short book is made up of quick sketches of fifty different types of monomania, with "characters" like the Corpse-Skulker, Fun Runner, Narrow-Smeller, Misspeaker, and Woe Administrator. The very character that gives the collection its title, the Earwitness, represents the same qualities that Canetti had described about the poet's mission:

The earwitness makes no effort to look, but he hears all the better. He comes, halts, huddles unnoticed in a corner, peers into a book or a display, hears whatever is to be heard, and moves away untouched and absent. [...] He knows all the places

testo comprende sempre l'universo letterario nel quale si costruisce, e quanto più riflette la letteratura che lo precede, tanto più definisce, nel confronto e nel dialogo con la tradizione, la propria differenza e la propria identità. Lo strumento delle metamorfosi diventa allora la memoria, che conserva e innova, ripete e nello stesso tempo trasforma, in un movimento dialettico nel quale il nuovo nasce dal passato ma, lungi dal ridursi ad esso, lo investe di una luce inedita» Ezio Raimondi, «Voci e intertestualità», *Lettere italiane*, XLIX, 1997, pp. 545-554, p. 548.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>305</sup> [Where is oneself then? [...] One is in the rigour with which one sees and records all] Elias Canetti, *Die Provinz des Menschen*, op. cit., p. 271.

where there is something to be heard, stows it nicely away, and forgets nothing [...] his ear is better and more faithful than any gadget, nothing is erased, nothing is blocked<sup>306</sup>

As I will try to explain in the next paragraph, both Sarraute and Ginzburg can be defined earwitnesses, since they share with Canetti a deeply sensory approach to reality. In the work of the three authors, listening becomes not only a way to understand and untangle reality, but also to express it through writing.

## 3.2. The acoustic dimension of writing

## 3.2.1 Canetti's obsession with listening

Of the three authors, Elias Canetti is the one who most explicitly refers to acoustic perception as the primary component of his worldview<sup>307</sup>. In the vast collection of notes that forms part of Canetti's legacy, *Stimmenkrank*<sup>308</sup> (Voice-sick) is the shortest entry. It is a self-diagnosis of a pathology – the obsession with listening – that has manifested itself in a very specific way in Canetti's production. When one examines the titles of several of the author's works (*The Torch in my Ear*, *The Earwitness*, *The* 

 $<sup>^{306}</sup>$ Elias Canetti, Earwitness: fifty characters, Seabury Press, New York, 1979, p. 43.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>307</sup> According to Antonello Lombardi «si può certamente affermare che la percezione sonora ha influenzato il pensiero e la scrittura canettiani in misura considerevole fino a configurarsi come una vera e propria "coazione all'ascolto"» [it can certainly be said that sound perception has influenced Canetti's thinking and writing to a considerable degree to the extent of being a true "compulsion to listen"] Antonello Lombardi, op. cit., p. 13.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>308</sup> Elias Canetti, *Notes from Hampstead*, op. cit., p. 6.

Voices of Marrakesh), as well as certain recurring formulas in his analyses (Acoustic mask, Rhythm, The orchestral conductor), the semantic fields of voice and ear become clear. In 1976 he writes that in his case, one should consider «Das Ohr, nicht das Hirn, als der Sitz des Geistes»<sup>309</sup>. We cannot simply state that sound perception acquires the depth of a theme in the writer's work and, as such, can be approached from time to time according to its use. Instead, we are witnessing a new and distinct scenario: listening is a point of view for Canetti. His ears, those sensors whose only limitation is that they cannot close on command<sup>310</sup>, are the filter through which he interprets reality, approaches things, and, most importantly, the people and events of his time. In essence, Canetti's writings are a philosophical investigation into the meaning of sounds that is always intertwined with a reflection on the meaning of writing. As Susan Sontag notices:

Canetti claims to be a "hear-er" rather than a "see-er". In *Auto-da-Fé*, Kien practises being blind, for he has discovered that "blindness is a weapon against time and space; our being is one vast blindness". Particularly in his work since *Crowds and Power* – such as the didactically titled *The Voices of Marrakesh*, *Earwitness*, *The Tongue Set Free* – Canetti stresses the

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>309</sup> [The ear, not the brain, as the seat of the mind] Elias Canetti *Die Provinz des Menschen*, op. cit., p. 218.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>310</sup> We refer here to the dream of the sinologist Kien, protagonist of the novel *Auto da fé*, who dreams of being able to open and close his ears on command: «One night he grew lids to his ears, he opened and closed them as he pleased, just as with his eyes. He tried them out a hundred times and laughed. They fitted exactly, they were soundproof, they grew as if they had been ordered and were complete at once. Out of sheer joy he pinched them. Then he woke up, his earlids had become ordinary bedclothes he had dreamed. How unfair, he thought; I can close my mouth whenever I like, as tight as I like, and what has a mouth to say? It is there for taking in nourishment, yet it is well defended, but ears – ears are a prey to every onslaught» Elias Canetti, *Auto-da-Fé*, Pan Books, London, 1978, p. 100.

moralist's organ, the ear, and slights the eye (continuing to ring changes on the theme of blindness). Hearing, speaking, and breathing are praised whenever something important is at stake, if only in the form of ear, mouth (or tongue), and throat metaphors. When Canetti observes that "the loudest passage in Kafka's work tells of this guilt with respect to the animals", the adjective is itself a form of insistence. What is heard is voices – in which the ear is a witness. (Canetti does not talk about music, nor indeed about any art that is non-verbal.) The ear is the attentive sense, humbler, more passive, more immediate, less discriminating than the eye. Canetti's disavowal of the eye is an aspect of his remoteness from the aesthete's sensibility, which typically affirms the pleasures and the wisdom of the visual; that is, of surfaces. To give sovereignty to the ear is an obtrusive, consciously archaizing theme in Canetti's later work. Implicitly he is restating the archaic gap between Hebrew as opposed to Greek culture, ear culture as opposed to eye culture, and the moral versus the aesthetic. Canetti equates knowing with hearing, and hearing with hearing everything and still being able to respond<sup>311</sup>

This predilection for listening, Sontag notes, is linked to an ethical vision of the writer's craft, which presupposes an openness to the other and a subjective formation under the sign of intersubjectivity. In this perspective, listening becomes a real working method for Canetti. In the last part of the autobiographical trilogy, Canetti describes his profession as a mobile workshop based in the library-studio but also operating outside, in

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<sup>311</sup> Susan Sontag, art. cit., [online].

cafés on trams, in the street<sup>312</sup>. He practised, and those who were with him were urged to do so, to listen to several distant and different voices at the same time, keeping them separate and following the course of each one. Nothing was to be missed: the purpose of that training was to capture the relationship that naturally, without external intervention, was established between those voices. One of the determining factors in Canetti's extraordinary propensity to listen is undoubtedly the varied and dense environment of sounds and languages in which he grew up: «Ruschuck, on the lower Danube, where I came into the world, was a marvelous city for a child, and if I say that Ruschuk is in Bulgaria, then I am giving an inadequate picture of it. For people of the most varied backgrounds lived there, on any one day you could hear seven or eight languages»<sup>313</sup>. In fact, as we will see in more detail in the following chapters, the entire autobiographical trilogy is enveloped in a distinct acoustic atmosphere. Childhood Sephardic songs and later forgotten languages from Bulgaria<sup>314</sup>

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<sup>312</sup> In the third part of the autobiography, Canetti describes what his night-time listening sessions consist of: «If I entered a nocturnal tavern that offered me a favorable opportunity to hear, I would remain for a long time, until the place closed at 4 a.m., I would surrender to the stream of entering, departing, returning figures. I enjoyed shutting my eyes as though half asleep or turning to the wall and only listening [...] scenes took shape out of the ebb and flow, the movement of acoustic masks, and these scenes, in contrast to the bare shrieks of self-assertion by those names, were interesting – that is, not calculating» Elias Canetti, *The Play of the Eyes*, in: *The Memoirs of Elias Canetti*, op. cit., p. 578. Later in the story, Canetti will return to his own acoustic immersion techniques according to a process of concentration that he describes as follows «The voices paid no attention to one another; each started off in its own way and proceeded undeviatingly like clockwork, but when you took them in all together, the strangest thing happened; it was as though you had a special key, which opened up an overall effect unknown to the voices themselves», Ibid., p. 784.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>313</sup> Elias Canetti, *The Tongue set Free*, in: *The Memoirs of Elias Canetti*, op. cit., p. 6.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>314</sup> On Canetti's forgotten languages see: Daniel Heller-Roazen *Echolalias*. *On the forgetting of Language*, Zone Books, New York, 2005.

pave the way for what will be the true vocal dominant that will characterise the entire childhood: the mother figure. In the second part of the autobiography, the noises of 1920s Vienna act as a prelude to the fatal encounter with one of the most feared voices in the town, the inflexible judge of his time: Karl Kraus<sup>315</sup>. Even before his appearance, Canetti describes a voice that «instantly changed and kept changing incessantly, and one was very soon amazed at the variety that he was capable of»<sup>316</sup>. As Canetti writes:

Kraus was haunted by voices, something that is not as rare as one might think – but with one distinction: The voices pursuing him *did exist*, in the Viennese reality. He could hear them everywhere, on streets, squares, in restaurants [...] But since his ear was constantly open (it never closed, it was always in action, it was always listening), he also had to read

the writer. In Canetti's work, the question of listening cannot be separated from a conception of "auditory submission" that almost borders on hypnosis. Starting already with his mother who kept him «trapped [...] in a dreadful hypnosis, and she was the only one who could release [him]» (*Tongue set Free*, op. cit., p. 75). Canetti investigates the acoustic power of language in depth in *Crowds and Power* and embodies it in the figure of the "orchestral conductor". The figure is inspired by orchestral conductor Hermann Scherchen whom Canetti knew (and describes accurately in the third part of the autobiography) and whose affabulatory power he was able to experience. See: Canetti, *The Play of the Eyes*, in: *The Memoirs of Elias Canetti*, op. cit.

writer's deadly invectives, which Canetti describes as follows: «When he sat down and began to read, I was overwhelmed by his voice, which had something unnaturally vibrating about it, like a decelerated crowing. But this impression quickly vanished, for his voice instantly changed and kept changing incessantly, and one was very soon amazed at the variety that he was capable of. The hush in which his voice was at first received was indeed reminiscent of a concert; but the prevailing expectation was altogether different. From the start, and throughout the performance, it was the quiet before a storm» Elias Canetti, *The Torch in my Ear*, in: *The Memoirs of Elias Canetti*, op. cit., p. 345.

these newpapers as though he were *hearing* them. The black, printed, dead words were audible to him. When he quoted them, he seemed to be letting voices speak: acoustic quotations [...] Karl Kraus opened my ear, and no one could have done it like him. Since hearing him, it has not been possible for me not to do my own hearing<sup>317</sup>

For Kraus, the written page became an acoustic dimension precisely because, as Canetti states, he was haunted by voices, voices which existed in the streets and clubs of Vienna. Kraus' works are substantially laced with acoustic quotations from newspapers and magazines, and his masterpiece *Die letzten Tage der Menscheit*, in which Kraus claims to have simply reported shreds of speeches he had witnessed, consists largely of acoustic quotations. From the Krausian model of the *akustisches Zitat*, Canetti developed the idea of the *akustische Maske*<sup>318</sup>, which is negatively

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>317</sup> Elias Canetti, *The Conscience of Words*, op. cit., p. 34.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>318</sup> Fuchs provides a rather clear description of acoustic masks: «it is the spoken word with its variations in pitch, tone, rhytm, and other paralinguistic modes of expression that forms a person's acoustic mask. For Canetti the acoustic mask betrays a person's true character without any reference to the content of the speech act; it therefore becomes an essential satirical tool in many of his writings», Anne Fuchs, «"The deeper nature of my German". Mother Tongue, Subjectivity, and the Voice of the Other in Elias Canetti's Autobiography», In: Lorenz, Dagmar C. G., (eds.) A companion to the works of Elias Canetti. Studies in German literature, linguistics, and culture. Rochester, Boydell & Brewer, Woodbridge, 2004, pp. 45-60, p. 55. In a 1942 note, Canetti states that he treated his characters as musical themes. According to the author: «Über das Drama. - Es wird mir langasam klar, daß ich im Drama etwas verwirklichen wollte, was aus der Musik stammt. Ich habe Konstellationen von Figuren wie Themen behandelt. Der Hauptwiderstand, den ich gegen die "Entwicklung" von Charakteren empfand (so als wären sie wirkliche, lebende Menschen), ernnert daran, daß auch in der Musik die Instrumente gegeben sind. Sobald man sich einmal für dieses oder jenes Instrument entschieden hat, hält man daran fest, man kann es nicht, während ein Werk abläuft, in ein anderes Instrument umbauen. Etwas von der schönen Strenge der Musik beruht auf dieser Klarheit der Instrumente» [About Drama. - It is

connoted: for both Kraus and Canetti, the word is no longer an expression, but only a means of communication through which nothing can be communicated any more, as words are unable to draw on the dimension of an authentic dialogue<sup>319</sup>. From Kraus, Canetti also learnt that one could do what one wanted with other people's words: Kraus quoted, resumed, and distorted his opponent's expressions to underline grammatical errors and semantic contradictions, a procedure that on the whole aimed at laying bare the morally dubious position of the interlocutor. For Canetti, the Viennese years are the years of the «school of hearing»<sup>320</sup>, during which the writer transforms his sense of hearing into a veritable sound archive, conducting his research with daily meticulousness in the streets, on the 38 tram, in cafés and taverns in search of new acoustic masks with which to enrich his collection. These were the same years in which he experienced the first dazzling experience that he would pursue for over thirty years to understand its meaning: the voice of the mass. It was the fire at the Palace of Justice in

becoming clear to me that I wanted to realise something in the plays that comes from music. I treated constellations of characters like themes. The main resistance I felt to the "development" of characters (as if they were real, living people) is that in music, too, the instruments are given. Once you have chosen this or that instrument, you stick to it, you can't, while a work is going on, change it into another instrument. Something of the beautiful rigour of music is based on this clarity of instruments] Elias Canetti, *Die Provinz des Menschen*, op. cit., pp. 14-15.

and the speaker." Describing a writer as a voice has become such a cliché that it is possible to miss the force – and the characteristic literalness – of what Canetti means. The voice for Canetti stands for irrefutable presence. To treat someone as a voice is to grant authority to that person; to affirm that one hears means that one hears what must be heard» Susan Sontag, art. cit., [online].

<sup>320</sup> Elias Canetti, *The Torch in my Ear*, in: *The Memoirs of Elias Canetti*, op. cit., pp. 413-490.

Vienna, the culmination of clashes between workers and police in July 1927, a capital event in Canetti's life that would weigh heavily in the elaboration of *Crowds and Power* and more generally in the writer's life. The sounds of those years will leave a visible trace in the author's work. Those sounds and phenomena, caught in *statu nascendi*, permeate Canetti's memory.

In the autobiographical trilogy, one witnesses numerous episodes in which the writer recounts events that took place more than sixty years earlier and yet, by recalling the sounds that accompanied them, he can evoke their most minute details. Following his youth in Vienna, the writer's life is marked by numerous displacements. But there is one trait in the author that he recognises, namely his passion for listening to people – a trait that reminds him of the despised analysts<sup>321</sup> – that does not leave him but adapts to successive metamorphoses. Upon moving to England, the writer became passionate about listening to Welsh and jotted down his impressions:

I spent many hours listening to people speaking in Wales. All I understood was a name now and then. While with

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>321</sup> «Ich hörte lange gut zu, ich war Redlich darin, doch war es nicht nur biedere Redlichkeit, es war auch meine Passion, von Menschen alles zu vernehman, was sie über sich sagen wollen. Damit habe ich mich zeitlebens wie die Sorte von Menschen aufgeführt, die ich am tiefsten verachte: Analytiker [...] Ich selber war mehr Zuhörer als Analitiker, und ich bekam so viel zu hören, daß es etliche hundert Bände zu schreiben gäbe, wenn ich es alles noch wüßte» [I listened carefully for a very long time, I was honest about it, but it was not only honesty, it was also my passion to hear everything people wanted to say about themselves. In this way I have behaved throughout my life like the kind of people I despise most deeply: analysts [...] I myself was more of a listener than an analyst, and I got to hear so much that there would be several hundred volumes to write if I still remembered all of it.] Elias Canetti, *Party im Blitz. Die Englischen Jahre*, Carl Hanser Verlag, München, 2003, p. 114.

them, I was happy (I often feel confined with people whom I understand). The enormous latitude for conjecture in the field of a completely foreign language. False interpretations, errors, nonsense thoughts. But also expectations, overestimations, promise. Foreign languages as oracles<sup>322</sup>

The most interesting reflections of the same years on voice, however, come from a text usually considered secondary in the author's corpus: *The Voices of Marrakech*. It is 1954 and Canetti is devoted to the final draft of *Mass and Power* (1960). The author «si trova in una fase di completo rifiuto del proprio mondo abituale: dei libri, della cultura, dello studio, della carta»<sup>323</sup> and the journey seems an excellent pretext for «l'interruzione di una continuità e al tempo stesso la ricerca di stimoli nuovi»<sup>324</sup>. The book – whose title already hints at the non-semantic aspect of the experience –, published fourteen years later, is an unusual chronicle that can be regarded as a *nostos* towards childhood<sup>325</sup>, towards a timeless universe. The account evokes a series of acoustic impressions that are described as «a marvellously luminous, viscid substance [...] defying words»<sup>326</sup>. The third chapter opens with a reflection on the difficulty of narrating in words what one has not perceived through them:

There were incidents, images, sounds, the meaning of which is only now emerging; that words neither recorded nor edited; that are beyond words, deeper and more equivocal than

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<sup>322</sup> Elias Canetti, *Notes from Hampstead*, op. cit., pp. 110-111.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>323</sup> [is in a phase of complete rejection of his usual world: books, culture, study, paper] Matteo Galli, *Invito alla lettura di Elias Canetti*, Mursia, Milano, 1986, p. 114.

<sup>324 [</sup>the interruption of a continuum and at the same time the search for new stimuli] Ibid., p. 114.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>325</sup> See: Antonello Lombardi, op. cit., p. 73.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>326</sup> Elias Canetti, *The Voices of Marrakesh*, op. cit., p. 23.

words. A dream: a man who unlearns the world's languages until nowhere on earth does he understand what people are saying. What is there in language? What does it conceal? What does it rob one of? During the weeks I spent in Morocco [...] I wanted sounds to affect me as much as lay in their power, unmitigated by deficient and artificial knowledge on my part<sup>327</sup>

This passage makes it clear that Canetti is not simply interested in voice as a supplement of language; he is particularly fascinated by what he calls «the peculiar strength and energy of words»<sup>328</sup> those moments when this supplement stands alone the experience of voice unaccompanied by understanding, the encounter with pure voice.

When it comes to the voice, Kata Gellen's reading demonstrates the writer's interest in *unverstandene Worte*, i. e., «acoustic phenomenality of language»<sup>329</sup>, in which language is stripped of its intelligible content, and opens up onto the space of «raw experience [that is] not susceptible to transcription»<sup>330</sup>. Canetti's interest lies in the pure voice<sup>331</sup>, floating around signification<sup>332</sup>. According to Gellen, «Canetti absorbs the raw, untranslated

<sup>327</sup> Ibid., p. 23.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>328</sup> Elias Canetti, *The Conscience of Words*, op. cit., p. 61.

<sup>329</sup> Kata Gellen, «The Opaque voice: Canetti's foreign Tongues», in: William Collins Donahue and Julian Preece (eds.), *The Worlds of Elias Canetti. Centenary Essays*, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, Newcastle, 2007, pp. 23-46.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>330</sup> Kata Gellen, art. cit., p. 25.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>331</sup> On this topic see: Karoline Naab, *Elias Canetti akustische Poetik*, Peter Lang, Frankfurt am Main, 2003; and Sigurd Paul Scheichl, *Hörenlernen. Zur teleologischen Struktur der autobiographiscen Bücher Canettis*, in: Friedbert Aspetsberger and Gerald Stieg, (eds.), *Elias Canetti. Blendung als Lebensform*, Athenäum, Königstein, 1985, pp. 73-79.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>332</sup> As Gellen claryfies very well: «What is the voice? It is both inside and outside language, it is both human and animal; it accompanies communication and expression but is at the same time inseparable from it; it is distinct from the semantic code of language, and yet it cannot be said that it signifies nothing. It

material of language» by physically encountering «its material force» in such a way that he can «dispense with concepts, codes, and systems»<sup>333</sup>.

According to Gellen, the effect that listening has for Canetti is ultimately twofold. On the one hand, she points out that for Canetti «to ignore this experience [of listening to the sound of words] is to commit an unpardonable offense – namely, the murder of language, turning words into corpses»<sup>334</sup>. These corpses are what Canetti refers to as "acoustic masks", i.e., the language used by those who identify with specific opinions or ideologies. On the other hand, Gellen continues, «when we ignore the sounds of language, we lose a sense of the foreign that helps us hear the strangeness of our own tongues»<sup>335</sup>. Gellen offers an important point concerning Canetti's philosophy of language, i. e., the importance that the voice plays in Canetti's conceptualization of the task of the writer, which allows for the ability to listen beyond or behind the corpse-like acoustic masks that were heard as the chatter of public life. In this way, Canetti – just like Sarraute – offers the sense of hearing as a model for encountering what is hidden within language.

## 3.2.2 Sarraute's acoustic unconscious

Sarraute's relationship with the acoustic dimension of language is similar to the interest in the "opaque voice" described by Gellen in Canetti's work. The acoustic dimension innervates Sarraute's entire production and

sometimes functions as a mark of the individual, but it can also confound the very idea of a personal voice associated with subjectivity. As the medium of spoken language, voice accompanies every utterance, and yet it seems to be the dimension of language of which Canetti never tires», art. cit., p. 25.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>333</sup> Kata Gellen, art. cit., p. 34.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>334</sup> Ibid., p. 38.

<sup>335</sup> Ibid.

her poetics more generally. As we have already mentioned, in her collection of essays, L'ère du soupçon, which is considered one of the founding texts of the Nouveau Roman, Sarraute investigates the modalities of the character's disappearance. The character is an «anonymous "I"» 336 who no longer must be the focal point of the work. Sarraute postulates that both the author and the reader not only distrust the novel's hero but also distrust each other. Thus, the character is deprived of this double support. According to Sarraute's theorisation, the hero disapperars from the literary scene together with the plot. In Sarraute's point of view the reader is part of the literary process, they should be attentive and mistrustful: «in order to identify the characters, he is obliged to recognise them at once, like the author himself, from the inside»<sup>337</sup>, they must «plunge into them as deeply as the author, whose vision [they make their] own»<sup>338</sup>. Through her writing, Sarraute wants to describe the infinite and imperceptible moments that occur in the characters, and to show the sensations they experience. It is about describing inner actions, rather than everyday situations or acts. Sarraute's work is thus based on the negation of the character in favour of interpersonal relationships. Interpersonal relationships are traditionally built on mutual listening and verbal communication. As noted by Maulpoix, for Sarraute: «les humains [...] sont faits de mots. Les humains sont ces mots qu'ils parlent, à condition évidemment d'entendre ceux-ci comme la doublure de ceux qu'ils taisent»<sup>339</sup>.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>336</sup> Nathalie Sarraute, *The Age of Suspicion*, op.cit., p. 56.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>337</sup> Ibid., p. 70.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>338</sup> Ibid., p. 71.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>339</sup> [Humans [...] are made of words. Humans are the words they speak, on condition, of course, that we understand these words as the understudy of the words they keep silent], Jean-Michel Maulpoix, «Elle a l'ouïe si fine...», *Littérature*, 2000, n.118, pp. 11-14, p. 12.

Sarraute's writing is thus a pradox: she wants to write *beyond words*. Hence, her interest lies not only in the surface layer of conversations, but also in the deep, psychic layer of these (what she calls the *sous-conversation*)<sup>340</sup>. Her aim is to analyse: «the infinitely profuse growth of the psychological world and the vast, as yet almost unexplored regions of the unconscious»<sup>341</sup>. In order to describe what happens in the human unconscious during conversations, the feelings that are experienced and that are difficult to put into words, the author develops the concept of "tropism". Tropism (from the Greek  $\tau \rho \acute{o}\pi o \varsigma$ , "tropos") is the tendency of an organism to react in a specific way when exposed to a stimulus. It is derived from the vocabulary of biology, specifically botany. The author describes tropisms as follows:

These are indefinable movements that quickly slide to the limits of our consciousness. They are the origin of our gestures, our words, and the emotions we express, which we believe we experience and can define. They seemed to me, and still seem to me, to constitute the secret source of our existence. Since, while we carry out these movements, no word - not even the words of inner monologue - expresses them, as they develop in us and vanish with extreme rapidity, without us clearly perceiving what they are, producing in us sensations that are often very intense but brief...<sup>342</sup>

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>340</sup> Tropisms, a formless, pre-linguistic psychic experience, are the basis of sub-conversation. Sarraute's characterisation of tropisms recalls in many respects what Kristeva called "semiotic language", i.e., language that is not subject to the influence of the surrounding world.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>341</sup> Nathalie Sarraute, *The Age of Suspicion*, op. cit., p. 62.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>342</sup> « Ce sont des mouvements indéfinissables, qui glissent très rapidement aux limites de notre conscience; ils sont à l'origine de nos gestes, de nos paroles, des sentiments que nous manifestons, que nous croyons éprouver et qu'il est

For Sarraute, the conception of tropisms is rooted in oral conversation<sup>343</sup>. There can be no tropism without dialogue, without the voice of one person carried towards another. Thus, we understand that the voice is at the basis of her writing and that it is integrated into the very composition of her texts. A tropism manifests when one has the impression that something profound is happening while listening to someone talk. This phenomenon is a psychological movement, a sensation felt at the edge of consciousness that vanishes as quickly as it appeared.

As they are theorised in the book *Tropisms* and subsequently in Sarraute's other works, tropisms arise from repetitive and conventional dialogical situations. The occurrence of tropisms gives the reader the feeling that the subjects on stage do not really engage in dialogue. Communication – in Sarraute's work – is always equivocal and never authentic (if we want to use Canetti's definition, when people engange in institutionalized or conventional speech they act as "acoustic masks"). There are many instances in Sarraute's works where tropisms arise precisely from overheard words, unimportant words, or stereotyped expressions: «Very ordinary

possible de définir. Ils me paraissaient et me paraissent encore constituer la source secrète de notre existence. Comme, tandis que nous accomplissons ces mouvements, aucun mot — pas même les mots du monologue intérieur — ne les exprime, car ils se développent en nous et s'évanouissent avec une rapidité extrême, sans que nous percevions clairement ce qu'ils sont, produisant en nous des sensations souvent très intenses, mais brèves...» Nathalie Sarraute, *Préface*, in: Id., *L'ère du soupçon*, Gallimard, Paris, 1956, p.8.

<sup>343</sup> In *The Age of Suspicion*, the author clearly recognizes dialogue as the external manifestation of tropisms: «the inner movements, of which the dialogue is merely the outcome and, as it were, the forthermost point – usually prudently tipped to allow it to come up to the surface – try to extend their action into the dialogue itself. To resist their constant pressure and contain them, the conversation stiffens, becomes stilted, it adopts a cautious, slackened pace. But it is because of this pressure that it stretches and twists into long sinuous sentences. Now a close, subtle game, which is also a savage game, takes place between the conversation and the sub-conversation», Nathalie Sarraute, *The Age of Suspicion*, op. cit., p. 114.

words, if I repeat them to you, you would laugh at me, and yet they entered into me, they became encrusted, I can't get rid of them, they are swelling, pressing... Something emanates from them»<sup>344</sup>. These sensations are thus not linked to what is said, but what is unsaid, to what happens in the *sous-conversation*. As Maulpoix points out:

Whereas language usually pushes the multiple towards unity, she puts it back in contact with and at the disposal of the diverse, the scattered. She wants to walk without crutches. She wants to find a breath where words asphyxiate, returning them to the very thing they are trying to fill. This means directing all one's attention and acuity towards the blurred, the opaque, the fleeting and the uncertain. This means oppsing the word to the discourse. This means choosing conversational accidents to theories and general ideas – just as there are road accidents: you slip, you lose control, you end up in the ditch or you just barely recover. It's all about the thread of life and meaning: the thread that the pen traces<sup>345</sup>

Tropisms' identification and their *mise en mots* is a paradox since on the one hand, tropisms cannot be fully captured through language, but on the other they are part of language itself. That's why writing becomes: «a

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>344</sup> Nathalie Sarraute, *Between Life and Death. A Novel,* George Braziller, New York, 1969, p. 52.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>345</sup> «Là où d'ordinaire la langue rabat le divers vers l'unité, elle la remet au contact et à la disposition du divers, de l'épars. Elle entend marcher sans béquilles. Retrouver une respiration là où les mots asphyxient, c'est les rendre à cela même qu'ils s'efforcent de combler. C'est tendre toute son attention, son acuité, vers le brouillé, l'opaque, le fugace et l'incertain. C'est opposer la parole au discours. C'est preferer aux théories et aux idées générales les accidents de conversation – comme il existe des accidents de la route : on dérape, on perd le contrôle, on se retrouve dans le fossé ou l'on se rétablit de justesse. Cela tient à un fil, la vie, le sens : celui que trace la plume» Jean-Michel Maulpoix, art. cit., p. 14.

constant battle between the force of language that drives and destroys sensation and sensation that also destroys language»<sup>346</sup>.

Since tropisms can be discerned in non-linguistic traces, in the timbre of a voice, in its intonation, Sarraute's writing appears to be deeply connected to the sensory dimension of language<sup>347</sup>. As Maulpoix notices:

Sarraute thus takes the pulse of human life, not at the wrist, but through the very skin of language that is speech. Its most epidermal surface, where it reacts to warmth and cold. Speech is an envelope that trembles, from within, either with a shiver or a stifling sensation. Examining our use of language is thus to seize being in its most diverse quivers, in the feverishness and anxiety of its intentions, scruples, and unspoken words. It is to join language where it prepares itself, hesitates, gets a little annoyed, takes too long to say what it means or hides its game. [...] To observe in slow motion its pushes and retentions. To discern its timidity behind its arrogance. Looking at it under a magnifying glass is to fabulously show language in its nascent state, as it germinates and organizes itself in the mind, or as it rises to the lips, sometimes stopped in extremis. To be interested in the word that is too much, the one that is missing, the one that hesitates or takes too long to be said. [...] Thus attentive to the imperceptible circulations of language, Nathalie Sarraute ultimately takes the pulse of existence in the very interval between beings: in what

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>346</sup> «une lutte continuelle entre la force du langage qui entraîne et détruit la sensation, et la sensation qui elle aussi détruit le langage», Nathalie Sarraute «Qui êtes vous?», Conversations avec Simone Benmussa, cit. in Rachel Boué, «Lieux et figures de la sensation dans l'œuvre de Nathalie Sarraute», in: *Littérature*, n.89, 1993, pp. 58-67, p. 59.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>347</sup> On this topic see: Rachel Boué art.cit., pp. 58-67.

sets them apart, brings them together, situates them, or constantly prompts them to evaluate themselves in relation to each other<sup>348</sup>

Sarraute thus performs a work of deconstruction of speech from its sonority, as well as research into the psychic effects of hearing. By highlighting the importance of the sonorous materiality of words, speech becomes an «objet vivant»<sup>349</sup>. In an interesting paper, Noro Rakotobe D'Alberto points out the importance of the sense of hearing in the process of detecting tropisms. She states: «Hearing thus allows us to grasp the tropisms, these sensations, these worlds that are emerging behind this or that word. Listening to the voice plays an essential role in this capture»<sup>350</sup>.

<sup>348 «</sup>Sarraute prend ainsi le pouls de la vie humaine, non pas au poignet, mais à même cette peau de la langue qu'est la parole. Sa plus épidermique surface. Là où elle réagit au chaud et au froid. La parole, c'est une enveloppe qui tremble. Du dedans qui frissonne ou qui étouffe. Ausculter notre usage de la parole, c'est donc saisir l'être en ses frémissements les plus divers, dans la fébrilité et l'anxiété de ses intentions, ses scrupules, ses non-dits. C'est rejoindre la langue là où elle se prépare, hésite, s'énerve un peu, tarde à se dire ou cache son jeu.... Observer au ralenti ses poussées et ses rétentions. Discerner ses timidités derrière ses arrogances. En la regardant à la loupe, c'est fabuleusement donner à voir la parole à l'état naissant, telle qu'en la tête elle germe et s'organise, ou telle qu'elle monte aux lèvres, parfois stoppée in extremis. S'intéresser au mot de trop, au mot qui manque, à celui qui hésite ou qui tarde à se dire. [...] Ainsi attentive aux circulations imperceptibles du langage, Nathalie Sarraute prend en définitive le pouls de l'existence dans l'intervalle même entre les êtres : en ce qui les oppose, les rapproche, les situe ou les porte sans cesse à s'évaluer les uns par rapport aux autres » Jean-Michel Maulpoix, art. cit., p. 13.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>349</sup> This is how Rachel Boué defines Sarraute's language. In this regard, the critic quotes a passage from Saussure's *Cours de Linguistique Générale*, according to which: «l'image acoustique n'est pas le son matériel, chose purement physique, mais l'empreinte psychique de ce son, la répresentation que nous en donne le témoignage de nos sens», Ferdinand de Saussure, *Cours de Linguistique Générale*, quoted in: Rachel Boué, art. cit., p. 62.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>350</sup> «L'ouïe permet donc de saisir les tropismes, ces sensations, ces mondes qui se dessinent derrière telle ou telle parole. L'écoute de la voix joue un rôle d'outil essentiel dans cette capture» Noro Rakotobe D'Alberto, «"vous les

Rakotobe D'Alberto argues that hearing is not only a way for the author or characters to acquire tropisms, but it is also an integral part of the reading process<sup>351</sup>. While describing the experience of reading Sarraute's novels, she prefers to label the processa as a "quasi auscultation". Sarraute's work thus becomes a "caisse de résonance" of the subsurface movements that inhabit our words.

Beyond its place in the texts, hearing is also important in the writer's own work. Maulpoix defines Sarraute «une oreille qui voit»<sup>354</sup> and adds that «sa plume est une oreille»<sup>355</sup>. By describing Sarraute's writing, Maulpoix states:

Sarraute proposes a unique "use of language" that involves listening instead of speaking to silence. Writing is a form of hearing and understanding, as everything revolves around words, and it is essential to hear the language. To give attention and to write about these tiny matters of words, barely audible, which are "dramas," games, and fragments of human comedy. In this way, the reader becomes both a spectator and a listener. They come to listen to the language's affairs<sup>356</sup>

entendez?". L'écoute dans l'œuvre de Nathalie», *Mnemosyne o la costruzione del senso*, n°3, 2010, pp. 83-91, p. 83.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>351</sup> On this topic, Rakotobe D'Alberto offers many exemples. See: art. cit., pp. 84-85.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>352</sup> Ibid., p. 85.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>353</sup> Ibid., p. 83.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>354</sup> [an ear that can see], Jean-Michel Maulpoix, art. cit., p. 14.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>355</sup> [her pen is an ear] Jean-Michel Maulpoix, art. cit., p. 11.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>356</sup> «Un parler qui soit une écoute, au lieu d'une parole qui fait taire, tel est le singulier «usage de la parole» qu'elle nous propose. Car écrire, c'est entendre: comprendre aussi bien qu'écouter. Puisque tout est affaire de mots, il s'agit d'entendre la langue. Prêter l'oreille et la plume à ces minuscules affaires de vocables, à peine audibles, qui sont des "drames", des jeux, des fragments de

Throughout her career, the writer has repeatedly emphasised the importance of hearing as a key component of her writing process<sup>357</sup>. Indeed, as she mentions in an interview, the voice is for Sarraute a way of validating, or at least ensuring, the accuracy of the words she uses when writing:

NS: Because when I write I listen more than I see... I listen, don't I? I have to hear every word I write.

H1: Yes, and do you actually say it out loud?

NS: Yes, and when I read it's the same. [...] Normally, it takes me a long time because I have to say everything out loud, in my head, every word. [...] So when I'm writing I pronounce every word<sup>358</sup>

According to Sarraute's description of her creative process we could argue that her interest in the sonic dimension of words stems from a desire to find meaning outside of the space defined by the sign. She attempts to extract the first layers of meaning from their magma through the play of sounds. As noted by Edwin P. Grobe, Sarraute's stylistic originality consists in the writer's "phonic imagery". Grobe states:

comédie humaine. De sorte que le lecteur devienne à son tour spectateur tout autant qu'auditeur. Qu'il vienne écouter des affaires de langue» Jean-Michel Maulpoix, art. cit., p. 14.

<sup>357</sup> «J'entends davantage les mots que je ne les vois écrits» Nathalie Sarraute, quoted in Rachel Boué, art. cit., p. 60. «Is a writing that I hear as I write. I have to hear the words by articulating them inwardly» See Licari, « Entretiens avec Nathalie Sarraute», quoted in: Ann Jefferson, op. cit., Ebook.

<sup>358</sup> «NS: Parce que quand j'écris j'écoute plus que je ne vois... j'écoute, n'est-ce pas. Quand j'écris, il faut que j'entende chaque mot. [...] H1: Oui, et est-ce que réellement vous le prononcez à haute voix? [...] NS: Oui. Et quand je lis, c'est pareil. [...] Normalement, ça me prend un temps fou parce qu'il faut que je prononce tout à haute voix, dans ma tête, chaque mot. [...] Alors en écrivant, je prononce chaque mot» Interview quoted in Ann Jefferson, op. cit., Ebook.

In the quantitative profile of speech sound, in its phonetic inconstancy and variability, she finds esthetic representation of emotional instability [...]. The temporal continuum of speech sound suggests to her the irregular movement of the subconscious [...]. Contrary to the musical imagery of poetry, which evokes psychological states, Mme Sarraute's phonetic patterns suggest the naked movement of the subconscious *between* psychological states<sup>359</sup>

Summarising, in Sarraute's literary universe, the writer as well as the characters and the reader, are hypersensitive to the rhytms of the psychological world living hidden behind the appearence of things. This world is a world organised by resonance: «[t]he real world is made of sensations and tropisms. We recognize it because it vibrates. And only a good listener can perceive these vibrations and then vibrate himself, in unison»<sup>360</sup>.

Not surprisingly, in this literary world dominated by resonance, "quelque chose d'une "enfance" se pursuit ainsi»<sup>361</sup>. Similarly to Plínio Prado's "r-esistence de l'enfance" in Proust's writing, Sarraute's "enfance" is not a matter of re-descovering a lost past, but is matter of point of view: Sarraute's perspective is the one of a child listening to the adults; an *infans* whose interest lies in the sonority of speech and not in its signification:

Childhood in writing? [...] Nathalie Sarraute continues to see words as she heard them as a child: surrounded by white and heavy understatements, threats, or promises. She treats these

<sup>361</sup> [Something like "childhood" persists] Jean-Michel Maulpoix, art. cit., p. 12.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>359</sup> Edwin P. Grobe, «Symbolic Sound Patterns in Nathalie Sarraute's Martereau», *The French Review*, vol. 40, n. 1, 1966, pp. 84-91, p. 84.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>360</sup> Rakotobe D'Alberto, art. cit., p. 83.

words, with their deep and obscure histories, on the surface, so that they no longer refer to the chimaera of some hidden substance, but are understood as gestures, intentions. Words that speak with their entire body, even if they are spoken in a casual, clumsy, pretentious, or evasive manner<sup>362</sup>

The dimension of childhood in Sarraute's work is not a rediscovery of the past as lost time entrusted to involuntary memory, but rather a voluntary activity of archaeological research in a sub-world marked by sensation, semiotic order, and the pre-verbal dimension.

## 3.2.3 Ginzburg's acoustic realism

As in the case of Nathalie Sarraute, dialogue plays a central role in Natalia Ginzburg's writing. As we have seen, Sarraute explores in her work the imperceptible phenomena she calls tropisms, experienced by human consciousnesses in intersubjective space. Of these inner movements, conversation is but the epiphenomenon, deceptive because language is false, conventional, and alienating. From this awareness arises the abolition of the borders between the narrated and the dialogued, between the subconversation and the conversation, the preverbal and the voice of the character. The same can be said for the different modes of expression used by Ginzburg's characters such as captionless dialogues, monologues, or free indirect speech. The obsessive repetitiveness and sometimes paroxysmal

<sup>362 «</sup>Dans l'écriture, l'enfance? [...] Nathalie Sarraute continue de voir les mots – les fragments de phrases, propos, propositions – tels qu'enfant elle les entendait : cernés de blanc et lourds de sous-entendus, de menaces ou de promesses. Ces mots, avec leur profondes et obscures arrières-cours, elle les traite en surface, de sorte qu'ils ne renvoient plus à la chimère de quelque substance dissimulée, mais soient appréhendés comme des gestes, des intentions. Des mots qui parlent de tout leur corps, à même les désinvoltures, maladresses, faux-semblants ou faux-fuyants de notre usage de la parole» Ibid., p. 12.

recourse to conventional chatter creates alienating effects and opens up glimpses into the subjects' secret anxieties.

In contrast to Sarraute however, in Ginzburg's mind, the act of saying equals stating the truth. As Sandra Petrignani observes, Ginzburg « recognised the importance of "telling the truth" in literature from an early age, but then sowed the pages with cautious silences. She was between the ages of sixteen and seventeen when she wrote her first poetic statement, to which she would remain devoted for the rest of her life: "Tell the truth." Only in this way does a work of art emerge»<sup>363</sup>.

Much of the information we have about Natalia Ginzburg's writing work comes from the 1962 essay entitled *Il mio mestiere*<sup>364</sup>. In the essay, the writer describes her childhood's years and states that, as a child, she would prefer to remain quite silent and would endeavour to speak as fast and as concisely as she could, for fear of not being listened to, or of being ignored by her family:

Furman: At times in your fiction and memoirs, despite the strength of the narrator's voice, I hear almost a first person plural, as though a person in a family doesn't have an individual voice but only exists as a part of a family.

Ginzburg: I had several brothers, and I was the youngest, the little one, and they were always telling me to be quiet when they spoke. Perhaps this had an effect on my writing in the sense

 $^{364}$  See: Natalia Gizburg, *Il mio mestiere*, in: *Le piccole virtù*, Einaudi, Torino, 1962, pp. 73-90.

166

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>363</sup> «ha teorizzato fin dalla prima giovinezza la necessità in letteratura del "dire la verità", ma ha poi seminato di prudenti silenzi le pagine. Aveva fra i sedici e i diciassette anni quando scrisse la sua prima dichiarazione di poetica a cui si manterrà fedele tutta la vita: "Dire la verità. Solo così nasce l'opera d'arte» Sandra Petrignani, *La corsara*, op. cit., Ebook.

that I felt that I had to say things in a hurry in order to be listened to, and a little because the others were talking. When the others were talking, I could only get a few words in edgewise. All this probably had its influence.<sup>365</sup>

As we shall see, certain aspects of this child who speaks quickly so as not to be interrupted, characterise the adult narrator. Ginzburg's distinctive style is distinguished using everyday, clear, and dry language, as well as frequent repetition. At times a gesture or an intonation is sufficient for her to describe a character, or perhaps the effects of a character on others. As a result, Ginzburg's writing is fundamentally anti-rhetorical and anti-intellectualist<sup>366</sup>. The «chiarezza comunicativa»<sup>367</sup> to which Ginzburg aspires is not only related to her desire to be understood, but also to the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>365</sup> Laura Furman and Natalia Ginzburg, «An interview with Natalia Ginzburg», *Southwest Review*, vol. 72., n. 1, 1987, pp. 34-41, pp. 37-38.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>366</sup> Elena Clementelli, in her book *Invito alla lettura di Natalia Ginzburg*, summarizes very well the style that has characterised Ginzburg's writing since the early novels: «presentazione dei personaggi condotta in base alle azioni stesse che compiono; assenza di descrizioni; tono discorsivo e apparentemente disuguale, a sbalzi, come la corrente alterna del pensiero umano; suggerimenti talvolta discontinui e improvvisi della memoria. Inoltre: un ambiente familiare che è quello cui la scrittrice ama ritornare più spesso, che non manca mai al centro dei suoi romanzi e racconti, sempre variato nelle situazioni e nei personaggi, eppure così insistito, così osservato e indagato come nucleo essenziale di vita, quali siano il mondo e le vicende che vi ruotano intorno» [presentation of the characters based on the very actions they perform; absence of description; discursive and apparently uneven tone, like the alternating current of human thought; the sometimes discontinuous and sudden suggestions of memory. In addition: a familiar environment, which is what the writer likes to return to most often, which never fails to be at the centre of her novels and short stories, always varied in situations and characters, yet so insisted upon, so observed and investigated as the essential core of life, whatever the world and the events that revolve around it] Elena Clementelli, *Invito alla lettura di Natalia Ginzburg*, Mursia, Milano, 1977, p. 43.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>367</sup> Ibid., p. 99.

historical period she experienced<sup>368</sup>. Like Canetti with his Viennese experiences and Sarraute with her distrust of codified language, Ginzburg is also sensitive to the distortion of language that is typical of the twentieth century. On this subject she expresses herself in an essay that, not by chance, bears the title "Chiarezza" (Clarity), in which she states:

And it seems to me that all the good that has been given back to us with the death of fascism, the greatest and most precious good is perhaps the possibility of a return to clarity in its most varied and complex aspects. Back then our language could not be clear and limpid because sharpness and clarity are attributes of truth, and truth was not allowed. Back then we were all overloaded with words because words were the only thing we had at a time when all possibility of intimate and public well-being was denied us. But how to free ourselves of all the darkness and the veils behind which we have hidden for so

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>368</sup> As Maria Antonietta Grignani correctly notes, talking about an author's style is always a complex task and is used by critics as a reassuring simplification. In the case of Natalia Ginzburg, as well as Elias Canetti and Nathalie Sarraute, an attempt is made in these pages to give a series of hints and keys to reading their texts that will help us in our analysis. Our vision, however, is not to consider our three authors as figures who have remained unchanged over time. In the case of Natalia Ginzburg, says Grignani: «Natalia Ginzburg è una scrittrice dotata di un'autocoscienza non comune, che le ha consentito di avvertire il pericolo connesso al mestiere, di non ripetere una maniera in osseguio alle eventuali attese del lettore. Perciò si eviterà qui di infilzare con lo spillo di una definizione compatta una vicenda narrativa che conta molti decenni e si è sempre mostrata attenta ai mutamenti della società e degli usi linguistico-stilistici che ne derivano» [Natalia Ginzburg is a writer endowed with an uncommon self-awareness, which has enabled her to perceive the danger associated with her job, not to repeat a style in accordance with the possible expectations of the reader. We will therefore avoid here to stick the pin of a compact definition on a narrative story that spans many decades and has always been attentive to the changes in society and the linguisticstylistic uses that result from them] Maria Antonietta Grignani, Novecento plurale. Scrittori e lingua, Liguori, Napoli, 2007, p. 133.

many years? How to find ourselves again? For whoever has been long refused bread all nutrition becomes difficult; for whoever has lived long in the dark the first moment in the sunlight is painful. Fascism oppressed the best days of our youth; it penetrated our soul and poisoned it. It's difficult for each one of us to free ourselves of it, even for those who opposed it when it first appeared. But I believe that the first thing to do is this, find ourselves again: go back to the most elementary and spontaneous forms in words, in human relationships, in thought and in feelings<sup>369</sup>

For Ginzburg, therefore, the desire for clarity – the desire for words to really describe things – arises as a revolt against the phoney and rhetorical language of fascism<sup>370</sup>. Likewise, speaking of the immediate post-

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>369</sup> Natalia Ginzburg, *Chiarezza*, in: Angela M. Jeannet and Giuliana Sanguinetti Katz (eds.), *Natalia Ginzburg. A Voice of the Twentieth Century*, University of Toronto Press, Toronto, 2000, pp. 230-233, p. 233.

<sup>370</sup> This is also how the scholar Domenico Scarpa interprets Natalia Ginzburg's style. According to Scarpa, the communicative clarity that the writer achieves through her marked use of dialogue is a "democratic" aspect of Ginzburg's style. The scholar thinks that the author's clarity is democratic because it conceals reticence and leaves the reader free to interpret the unspoken layer of the narrative: «La sua chiarezza è sempre reticente. Per strano che possa sembrare, questa chiarezza reticente è una virtú democratica, perché consente alla persona cui è rivolta di interpretarla in libertà, di meditarla e lavorarla, di prolungarla nelle direzioni piú diverse. (Quando la Ginzburg cominciò a scrivere racconti c'era Mussolini con la sua chiarezza pletorica e carceraria da monorotaia umana). È democratica perché, essendo chiara, non dissimula la convinzione delle proprie opinioni, ma essendo reticente non le impone con arroganza, bensí allude alla complessità e alla perplessità dalla quale si staccano. È democratica perché, essendo chiara, ha per scopo la comunicazione, ma è democratica anche perché la sua reticenza rispetta il mistero delle cose, la loro singolarità, il loro non lasciarsi definire, classificare ed esaurire. È democratica, infine, perché ha rispetto del disordine della vita, lo presuppone nell'atto stesso di mettere ordine in ciò che dice e vede». [Her clarity is always reticent. Strange as it may seem, this reticent clarity is a democratic virtue, because it allows the person to whom it is addressed to

war period in the last part of *Lessico famigliare*, Ginzburg expresses similar views:

The post-war period was a time when everyone imagined themselves to be poets and everyone imagined themselves to be politicians; everyone supposed that one could, and indeed should, make poems out of everything, after so many years in which it had seemed that the world had been paralysed and struck dumb and reality lay on the far side of a sheet of glass, in a vitreous, crystalline, and wordless stasis. Novelists and poets had fasted during the fascist years, there not being many words around that they were permitted to use, and the few that had gone on using words had picked them with the greatest possible care from the meagre lexicon of crumbs that still remained. During the fascist era, poets found themselves reduced to expressing only the arid, enclosed and sybilline world of dreams. Now there were many words in circulation once again, and once again reality seemed within reach, and those who had fasted for so long threw themselves joyfully into the harvest. And the harvest was universal because everyone decided to join in, and this caused a confusion between the language of poetry

interpret it in freedom, to meditate on it and work on it, to extend it in the most diverse directions. (When Ginzburg began writing short stories, there was Mussolini with his plethoric and prison-like clarity). It is democratic because, being clear, it does not conceal the conviction of its opinions, but being reticent, it does not impose them arrogantly, but rather alludes to the complexity and perplexity from which they are detached. It is democratic because, being clear, its purpose is communication, but it is also democratic because its reticence respects the mystery of things, their singularity, their not allowing themselves to be defined, classified and exhausted. Finally, it is democratic because it has respect for the disorder of life, it presupposes it in the very act of bringing order to what is being said and seen] Domenico Scarpa, *Postfazione*, in: Natalia Ginzburg, *Non possiamo saperlo. Saggi 1973-1990*, Einaudi, Torino, Ebook.

and the language of politics which seemed to have become mixed together. But then reality turned out to be no less complex and hidden and indecipherable and enigmatic than the world of dreams, and it proved still to lie on the far side of a sheet of glass, and the illusion of having shattered that glass turned out to be ephemeral<sup>371</sup>

Ginzburg's quote demonstrates that the writer is aware of the ethical responsibility in showing that words are, sometimes, very poor and insufficient in explaining events: «Simplicity and familiarity are specifically for Ginzburg the realms in which both truth and mystery hide. Hence her complex notion of language, which is never completely optimistic. For Ginzburg, words are means by which we can either reveal or hide important parts of our human condition. That is why even in some of her apparently "clearest" writings imperceptible shadows surround her crystalline words»<sup>372</sup>. Her style is thus not naïf nor ingenuous. As Sharon Wood notices, Natalia Ginzburg is

a writer whose beguiling simplicity of style and narrative technique mask a complex view of the world [...] she nonetheless takes issue with radical feminism, as did so many other writers of her generation. She shares the neorealist compulsion to direct representation, but rejects a preoccupation with class struggle, heroic resistance, and heroic poor [...] Ginzburg presents history in the lower case; her characters are not heroic protagonists but drift on the eddies created by events played out elsewhere. [...] Ginzburg,

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>371</sup> Natalia Ginzburg (1963), *The Things we used to say* (tra. eng. Judith Woolf), Arcade Publishing, New York, 1997, p. 158.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>372</sup> Eugenia Paulicelli, Natalia Ginzburg and the Craft of Writing, in: Natalia Ginzburg. A Voice of the Twentieth Century, op. cit., p. 155.

like Elsa Morante or Günter Grass, takes a worm's eye view of history, her characters caught up in events which they can barely comprehend, while the antifascism of some characters in the novel is seen to be rooted in the complex and muddy personal experience as much as in political ideology<sup>373</sup>

As I will argue, through the tension between macro-history and micro-history, Ginzburg addresses both the question of intersubjective communication and the relationship between reality, representation, and language. Luciana Marchionne Picchione, author of an interesting monography on Ginzburg, states:

In accordance with the need to defend the social aspect of literature, Ginzburg's expressive choices maximise the clarity and functionality of the language code, opting for a linear discourse that, in its widespread colloquialism, does not bear perceptible traces of exhausting formal elaborations or meticulous investigations of words. However, we are far from a naively exuberant compliance with the need to communicate: within the theorisations included in her essays, there are critical attitudes towards the contemporary verbal universe, which shed light on an awareness of a crisis in language<sup>374</sup>

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>373</sup> Sharon Wood, «Women's Writing in the Postwar Period». In: Penelope Morris, (ed.) *Women in Italy, 1945–1960: An Interdisciplinary Study*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2006.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>374</sup> «Conformemente all'esigenza di difendere la socialità della letteratura, le scelte espressive della Ginzburg valorizzano al massimo la chiarezza e funzionalità del codice linguistico, optando per un discorso lineare che nella sua diffusa colloquialità non rechi tracce percepibili di estenuanti elaborazioni formali o meticolose indagini sulla parola. Ma siamo lontani da un assecondamento ingenuamente esuberante dell'esigenza di comunicare: nell'ambito delle teorizzazioni incluse nella saggistica, non mancano atteggiamenti critici nei

Ginzburg's typical narrative then, do not develop a well-defined plot, but rather a succession and interweaving of psychological and emotive vibrations, relationships, events, and gestures<sup>375</sup>. Like the narrative situations of Nathalie Sarraute, in Ginzburg the aspects and minutiae of everyday life, in their own language, are the protagonists of the narrative<sup>376</sup>.

confronti dell'universo verbale contemporaneo, che fanno luce su una consapevolezza di crisi del linguaggio» Luciana Marchionne Picchione, Natalia Ginzburg, La nuova Italia, Firenze, 1978, p. 8. In the short essay entitled Silence, Ginzburg expresses opinions like those of Nathalie Sarraute in The Age of Suspicion. In post-war literature, the crisis of the ability to communicate becomes a common theme. Ginzburg states: «Those of us [writers] who have tried to write novels in our time know the discomfort and unhappiness that appears as soon as we reach the point when we have to make our characters exchange comments that are insignificant but pregnant with a desolate unhappiness: "Are you cold?" "No, I'm not cold." "Would you like some tea?" "No thanks." "Are you tired?" "I don't know. Yes, perhaps I'm a bit tired." This is how our characters talk. [...] The meagre barren words of our time are painfully wrung from silence and appear like the signals of castaways, beacons lit on the most distant hills, weak, desperate summonses that are swallowed up in space». Natalia Ginzburg (1962), Silence, in: Id., The Little Virtues, Arcade, New York, 1985, p. 69. This mistrust of language – so present in Sarraute's work – links Natalia Ginzburg's reflections to those that also animated Elias Canetti in the same years, who, in his collection of notes, expresses himself as follows: «Im Gebrauch ihrer Lieblingswendungen und – worte sind die Menschen geradezu unschuldig. Sie ahnen nicht, wie sie nicht verraten, wenn sie am harmlosesten daherplappern. Sie glauben, daß sie ein Geheimnis verschweigen, wenn sie von anderen Dingen reden, doch siehe da, aus den häufigsten Wendungen baut sich plötzlich ihr Geheimnis drohend und duster auf» [In using their favorite phrases and words, people are downright innocent. They have no idea how they won't tell when they're chattering away in the most harmless way. They think they are hiding a secret when they are talking about other things, but lo and behold, their secret suddenly builds up from the most common phrases, threatening and dark] Elias Canetti, Die Provinz des Menschen, op. cit., p. 14.

<sup>375</sup> On this topic see: Tonia Caterina Riviello, «From Silence to Universality in "Le piccole virtù" by Natalia Ginzburg», *Forum Italicum*, n. 33, 1999, pp. 185-199.

<sup>376</sup> As Clementelli points out, Natalia Ginzburg's knowledge and reflection on the crisis of language and the historical period in which she lived are reflected in her stylistic changes: «la materia narrativa della Ginzburg rispecchia un realismo

Through close-ups on private and domestic interiors, Ginzburg focuses on concrete particulars through the eyes of marginalised protagonists. In Ginzburg's narratives, the voice that says "I" – often a feminine voice – always deals with people she considers superior to her, situations that seem too complex for her capacities, and the linguistic and conceptual means she uses to represent them are always a little below what is required. The narrator's perspective is thus almost always a somewhat innocent, at times childhood-like perspective<sup>377</sup> of pure perception, (Domenico Scarpa labels it

alle cui radici si pone tutta l'angoscia esistenziale del nostro tempo. Questa matrice primaria rimane essenziale e non viene mai tradita dalla scrittrice, nel corso dei lievi mutamenti che si alternano alla superficie della sua opera (terza persona, prima persona, dialogo, rifiuto del dialogo diretto, ritorno ad esso e sua esasperazione nel teatro, approdo nella memoria, ossessione della verità); la realtà è sempre il terreno su cui si incentra l'esperienza di vita dei personaggi ginzburghiani in un apparente girare a vuoto, che è tuttavia concreto ricondursi al destino di dolore che isola e insieme accomuna gli uomini» [Ginzburg's narrative material reflects a realism at the roots of which lies all the existential anguish of our time. This primary source matrix remains essential and is never betrayed by the writer, in the course of the slight changes that alternate on the surface of her work (third person, first person, dialogue, rejection of direct dialogue, return to it and its exasperation in the theatre, landing in memory, obsession with truth); reality is always the ground on which Ginzburg's characters' life experience is centred in an apparent whirlwind, which is nevertheless concretely traced back to the destiny of sorrow that isolates and at the same time unites humans.] Elena Clementelli, *Invito* alla lettura di Natalia Ginzburg, op. cit., p. 108.

377 This aspect is particularly evident in *Lessico famigliare*, as Cesare Segre notes in the preface: «nel narrare, Natalia tiene i ricordi allo stadio di elaborazione proprio della bambina, e poi ragazza, che le cose vide, o vi partecipò. Reprime dunque le considerazioni che sarebbero consentite dalla sua maturità di scrittrice; e affida tutto alla maestria dello stile e al gioco degli accostamenti. Di qui la freschezza dell'evocazione e il tono fiabesco del racconto; di qui anche la sintassi semplice, frasi per lo più brevi con scarsa ipotassi; di qui infine l'impianto comportamentistico, che privilegia atti e parole mettendo fra parentesi motivazioni e connessioni» [In narrating, Natalia holds her memories at the stage of elaboration proper to the child, and then girl, who saw things, or participated in them. She represses the considerations that would be permitted by her maturity as a writer; and entrusts everything to the mastery of style and the play of juxtaposition. Hence the freshness of the evocation and the fairy-tale tone of the tale; hence also the

"prospettiva rasoterra")<sup>378</sup> which reports the dialogical dimension of speeches without commenting on them, but instead leaving traces of authorial comment or irony in the unspoken, in the silences and in the blanks. As Italo Calvino notes by quoting Eugenio Montale:

Eugenio Montale wrote about this book: "Among Italian writers today there is no one else who has managed to shift the tone of literary language without ever falling into the literal transcription of speech." It seems to me that Montale here has diagnosed one of the most serious plights of contemporary Italian narrative: the literary "tape recording" of people's banal speech. [...] Montale uses a musical metaphor for Natalia's writing: "everything is sustained" — he says — "by the continuous bass line of gossip, of chitchat." I am compelled to emphasize the fact that Natalia is interested in this gray, monotonous, sad music of people's speech<sup>379</sup>

After Eugenio Montale, Domenico Scarpa also uses a definition of Ginzburg's style by drawing on the acoustic domain. For Scarpa,

simple syntax, mostly short sentences with little hypitaxis; hence finally the behaviourist structure, which privileges acts and words by putting motivations and connections in brackets] Cesare Segre, *Introduzione* in: Natalia Ginzburg, *Lessico famigliare*, Einaudi, Torino, 2010, p. V.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>378</sup> Domenico Scarpa, "L'Offerta", in: Natalia Ginzburg, *Famiglia*, Einaudi, Torino, 2011, p. xiv.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>379</sup> Italo Calvino, «Natalia Ginzburg o le possibilità del romanzo borghese» in: *L'Europa letteraria*, 1961, pp. 132-138. Translated in English by Stiliana Milkova and Eric Gudas, Reading in Translation, [online] <a href="https://readingintranslation.com/2021/02/22/italo-calvino-natalia-ginzburg-or-the-possibilities-of-the-bourgeois-novel-translated-by-stiliana-milkova-and-eric-gudas/[last consultation: 29/12/2022].

Ginzburg's style is an «iperrealismo acustico» achieved through «l'iperverità linguistica del parlato ordinario»<sup>380</sup>.

Indeed, much of Ginzburg's success – above all in *Lessico* famigliare – can be traced in the «sapiente effetto di immediatezza di una lingua che riesce a restituire, nella scrittura, la freschezza e la cullante ripetizione della conversazione in famiglia»<sup>381</sup>.

This is what Enrico Testa labels "lo stile semplice". According to Testa, it would be wrong, however, to recognise in the highly original linguistic mixture of *Lessico famigliare* the direct reproduction, in writing, of the typical forms of orality: « The lower tones, of the repertoire and the anti-literary extremity typical of the language of *Lessico famigliare* do not determine an objective imitation of reality», explains Testa, pointing out that the same constant use of repetitions should be traced back to «a type of prose aiming more at a personal affabulatory reconstruction of figures and relationships than at the truthful reproduction of the real language»<sup>382</sup>. Although the language used in the narration cannot be identified with actual speech as much as with the writer's personal creative reworking, the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>380</sup> Domenico Scarpa, "L'offerta" in: Natalia Ginzburg, *Famiglia*, op. cit., pp. xiv-xv.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>381</sup> [clever effect of language immediacy that succeeds in restoring the freshness and lulling repetition of family conversation in writing] Elisabetta Abignente, op. cit., p. 135.

antiletteraria propri della lingua di *Lessico famigliare* non determinano [...] un'oggettiva imitazione dell'oralità [ma] un tipo di prosa che punta più ad una personale e affabulatoria ricostruzione di figure e rapporti, che alla neutra e verosimigliante riproduzione della realtà nella lingua d'uso» Enrico Testa, *Lo stile semplice*, Einaudi, Torino, 1997, p. 297. In his paper, Luigi Fontanella offers many examples of this style. See: Luigi Fontanella, «Natalia Ginzburg between Fiction and Memory: A Reading of *Le voci della sera* and *Lessico Famigliare*», in: Angela M. Jeannet and Giulia Katz, Natalia Ginzburg. A Voice of the Twentieth Century, University of Toronto Press, Toronto, 2000, pp. 40-41.

dimension of orality is certainly central to the novel, if we mean the acoustic dimension that dominates the evocation of the Levi household speeches. The style, if not dictated solely by a desire for verisimilitude, is also linked to the theme of childhood in this case<sup>383</sup>. As for Sarraute, for Natalia Ginzburg, the word is the founding element of human relationships. This is at least the impression conveyed to us by her work and *Lessico famigliare* in particular. The author tends to treat words as if they were objects either to be collected or discarded, judging them according to their capacity to establish relationships and affections. From this perspective, words are undoubtedly seen as possible keys to human relationships. At the same time, words appear in Ginzburg's narrative as an important tool for memory. In her short story entitled *He and I*, Ginzburg says:

I can repeat words that I love over and over again. I repeat the tune that accompanies them too, in my own yowling fashion, and I experience a kind of happiness as I yowl. When I am writing it seems to me that I follow a musical cadence or rhythm. Perhaps music was very close to

be applied to Ginzburg's style as well: «l'enfance est cette période même qui est formée, et (partiellement) recouverte, par l'ordre de l'ordinaire, ordre que le petit apprend jour après jour. Philosophes et écrivains de l'enfance se distinguent à la fois par la manière dont ils comprennent cette entrée dans l'ordinaire, cette mise en ordre de l'enfance, et dont ils comprennent ce qu'il reste en l'adulte de non ordonné : quelque chose qui continue à vivre en deçà des mots, sous les mots» [Childhood is the period that is formed and (partially) covered by the ordinary order, an order that the child learns day by day. Philosophers and writers on childhood are distinguished both by their understanding of this entry into the ordinary, this ordering of childhood, and by their understanding of what remains in the adult of the unordered: something that lives below words, below words] Layla Raïd, «Sous les mots, l'enfance. Sarraute et la philosophie du langage ordinaire», *A contrario*, vol. 2 n. 25, 2017, pp. 93-116.

my world, and my world could not, for whatever reason, make contact with it<sup>384</sup>

This sentence tells a lot about how acoustic perception is important to the writer in her work, similar to what we saw with Sarraute and Canetti, but it also tells us about the author's general interest in language: hers is not a rigorous intellectual approach, but a playful attraction. The author is fascinated by the word's concrete and sensory aspects.

A good example of this, is the 1971 short story entitled *Estate*, in which the author, recalling her own childhood and the pleasure she took in watching people play tennis, states: « What I wanted most in the world was to have a white pleated skirt, a racket and to be on a tennis court saying the words "play" and "ready". I whispered those words secretly to myself. They seemed to me the keys to happiness»<sup>385</sup>.

Lexicon and phraseology function in Ginzburg's work as reminders of people or episodes from the past<sup>386</sup>. The words heard are, in Ginzburg's work (as similarly in Canetti's case), what Segre calls «operatori

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>384</sup> Natalia Ginzburg, *He and I*, in: Id., *The Little Virtues*, op. cit. pp. 41-42.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>385</sup> «quello che io desideravo di più al mondo era avere una gonna bianca a pieghe, una racchetta e trovarmi su un campo di tennis dicendo le parole "play" e "ready". Sussurravo quelle parole in segreto fra me. Esse mi sembravano le chiavi della felicità» Natalia Ginzburg, *Vita immaginaria*, Einaudi, Torino, 2021, p. 137.

famigliare: «It is interesting to note that all these locutions were used by Natalia's relatives. She exumes them tranquilly in her memorialized pages, at times asking her deepest self significance. Several of these locutions have such *representative* force that, by synecdoche, they end up signifying the same character to which that locution was attributed» Luigi Fontanella, «Natalia Ginzburg between Fiction and Memory: A Reading of Le voci della sera and Lessico Famigliare», in: Angela M. Jeannet and Giulia Katz, op. cit., p. 40.

mnestici»<sup>387</sup>, and Cati labels «elementi di riattivazione diegetica»<sup>388</sup>, e.g., memory triggers.

In the essay *Il mio mestiere*, Ginzburg, tracing her early literary interests, speaks of a kind of pleasure she developed in her teen years in remembering and repeating certain phrases, usually imagined, or heard somewhere. The phrases repeated in acoustic enjoyment are part of the repertoire she imagined writing in her younger years:

I can remember nothing about it except that there was one phrase which pleased me very much and that tears came into my eyes as I wrote it, "He said: ah! Isabella is leaving". The chapter finished with this phrase which was very important because it was said by the man who loved Isabella although he did not know this as he had not yet confessed it to himself. I don't remember anything about this man [...] I know that for a long time I would feel a shiver of joy whenever I said "Ah! Isabella is leaving" to myself. I also often used to repeat a phrase which I had found in a serialized novel in Stampa which went like this, "Murder of Gilonne, where have you put my child?" [...] I was also very keen on Annie Vivanti. There is a phrase in *The Devourers* when she is writing to a stranger and says to him, "I dress in brown". This was another phrase which, for a long time, I repeated to myself. During the day I used to murmur to myself these phrases which gave me so much

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 $<sup>^{387}</sup>$ Cesare Segre, Introduzionein: Natalia Ginzburg,  $Lessico\ famigliare,$ op. cit., p. VII.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>388</sup> Alice Cati, *Gli strumenti del ricordo. I media e la memoria*, La Scuola, Brescia, 2016, p. 135.

pleasure: "Murder of Gilonne", "Isabella is leaving", "I dress in brown", and I felt immensely happy<sup>389</sup>

The acoustic pleasure of speech and the importance of the voice, become over time for Ginzburg a crucial part of her inner world and poetics. This is undoubtedly the case with *Lessico famigliare* (1963) where the coexistence and interactions of words and phrases constitute a crucial poetic component, not just a mere aesthetic detail. Even when there are no direct dialogues, Ginzburg's pages – crowded with voices – have a distinct oral quality; indeed, the phenomenal relationality among the characters' voices becomes a narrative space of figuration as well as action.

Some scholars, who have noted Ginzburg's tendency to construct her characters through lexical resonances, have interpreted the verbal texture of the writer's works as a desire to characterise and, consequently, dehumanise her characters<sup>390</sup>. My opinion here instead is that, in the light of the writer's awareness of the crisis of language in the second half of the twentieth century, her exploration of the verbal universe is ultimately twofold: on the one hand it has to be understood as the writer's attempt to follow her memory's work and, on the other hand as the only effective spider's web capable of fixing what remains of a community, or – more generally – of human relationships. I do agree here with Serena Todesco' opinion:

 $<sup>^{389}</sup>$  Natalia Ginzburg,  $My\ Vocation,$  in: Id., The Little Virtues, op. cit., pp. 55-56.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>390</sup> For example, this was the opinion of Piero de Tommaso when the book was published. See: Piero de Tommaso, «Una scrittrice "geniale"», *Belfagor*, 31 maggio 1963 quoted in Elena Clementelli, *Invito alla lettura di Natalia Ginzburg*, op. cit., p. 132. Cesare Segre, in the introduction to *Lessico famigliare*, also speaks of the words or phrases that characterise the different characters as «attributi epici». See: Cesare Segre, Introduzione, in: Natalia Ginzburg, *Lessico famigliare*, op. cit., p. vii.

As one reflects upon the speech phenomenology given by all of Ginzburg's narrating voices, the spectre of her reality acquires and maintains a sound, ergo a *bodily* quality that informs the empirical representability of her world. Her writings are imbued by acoustic acts, filled with vocalized utterances resonating in the reader's mind<sup>391</sup>

Speech acts and their resonant power is a narrative element that Ginzburg uses not only to connect the present with the past, but also to connect with the reader. It is that aspect that Clementelli calls «operazione di scavo e recupero dell'umano»<sup>392</sup>, that is a lingering on the physical aspect of things, including the bodily/acoustical part of language.

This is precisely what happens in *Lessico famigliare*, a text that, beginning its title, sets out to retrieve only the verbal mnestic traces of the past, allowing them to flow in a chorus of voices, through a narrative pathway that, as Domenico Scarpa points out, takes on the characteristics of a musical composition:

"Les mots de la tribu", "Lessico famigliare" (Family lexicon) is an expression that has entered the common language; and it is an expression that refers to language itself, to a code of communication. Natalia Ginzburg does not write the history of her family: she narrates its discourses. We must not forget that this title would be more appropriate for an essay, that there is a gap between the words that compose it, the first precious and learned, the second humble and

<sup>391</sup> Serena Todesco, «Natalia Ginzburg's Speech Acts: The Female Voice as a Form of Resistance», *Reading in Translation*, 2021 [online] https://readingintranslation.com/2021/02/22/natalia-ginzburgs-speech-acts-the-

female-voice-as-a-form-of-resistance/, [last consultation: 30/12/2022]

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>392</sup> Elena Clementelli, op. cit., p. 116.

concrete. Famigliare (of the tribe) is autobiographical material; Lessico (The Words) is the novel and the novelistic technique. Famigliare is the intimate and elementary aspect of the story; Lessico, its intellectual and abstract component. By playing on their interaction, Natalia Ginzburg imposes words on things, she imposes them as one imposes hands. But, above all, the words impose the past to resurrect: and this time, the imposition is an injunction, an imperious orchestration, it is mastery of the voices and of the syntactic score<sup>393</sup>

<sup>&</sup>quot;"Les mots de la tribu", "Lessico famigliare" (Lexique familial) » est une expression entrée dans le langage courant ; et c'est une expression qui renvoie au langage même, à un code de communication. Natalia Ginzburg n'écrit pas l'histoire de sa famille : elle en narre les discours. Nous ne devons pas oublier que ce titre serait plus approprié pour un essai, qu'il existe un écart entre les mots qui le composent, le premier précieux et docte, le second humble et concret. Famigliare (de la tribu) relève de la matière autobiographique ; Lessico (Les Mots) constituent le roman et la technique romanesque. Famigliare est l'aspect intime et élémentaire de l'histoire; lessico, sa composante intellectuelle et abstraite. En jouant sur leur interaction, Natalia Ginzburg impose les mots aux choses, elle les impose comme on impose les mains. Mais, surtout, les mots imposent au passé de ressusciter : et cette fois, l'imposition est une injonction, une orchestration impérieuse, elle est maîtrise des voix et de la partition syntaxique» Domenico Scarpa, *Natalia Ginzburg. Pour un portrait de la tribu*, *Cahiers de l'Hôtel de Galliffet*, Istituto Italiano di Cultura, Paris, 2010, p. 17.

## 4. THE SCHOOL OF HEARING

## 4.1. Resonances, echoes and musical metaphores

As we discussed in our "phenomenology of oto-bio-graphy", in the so-called Age of Suspicion, childhood narratives no longer respect a well-defined chronological structure. Twentieth century autobiographical narratives become increasingly fragmented: authors often focus on some particular events since the linearity of the life-journey is replace in favour of capturing moments considered worth narrating. When the chronological structure is abandoned, the narrative tends to be based around memory-associations. The abolition of chronology in the unconscious reflects in a narrative that is free from narrative construction. This type of narration, which privileges the self-conscious and metanarrative dimension, progresses through associations, advancements, and regressions beginning at any point along the chronological axis; i. e., what Nancy labelled "renvoi". Thus, one of the fascinating aspects of twentieth century self narratives is the juxtaposition between past (lived time) and present (narrated time). As Brugnolo states:

What makes Freudian childhood memories so narratively fascinating is that they are memories that sink into the non-space and non-time that characterises the unconscious dimension, i.e., they happen then, now and always, and they happen inside and outside of us, in fantasy and reality, or, rather, between fantasy and reality<sup>394</sup>

Although with very different thematic and narrative outcomes, Ginzburg, Canetti and Sarraute criticise and renew the commonly understood autobiographical genre. My argument is that the three authors – who share a profound dislike for the autobiographical<sup>395</sup> – challenge the genre, undermine its formal boundaries starting from the very predilection they showed for the acoustic sphere. In fact, examining their autobiographical works from an oto-bio-graphical perspective allows us to

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>394</sup> «Ciò che rende i ricordi infantili freudiani narrativamente tanto affascinanti è che si tratta di ricordi che affondano nel non-spazio e non-tempo che caratterizza la dimensione inconscia, essi cioè accadono allora, adesso e sempre, e accadono dentro e fuori di noi, nella fantasia e nella realtà, o, per meglio dire, tra la fantasia e la realtà» Stefano Brugnolo, art. cit., p. 371.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>395</sup> Ginzburg explicitly refers to a «sacro orrore dell'autobiografia» [sacred horror of autobiography], see Ginzburg quoted in Giuliana Minghelli, «Ricordando il quotidiano. Lessico famigliare o l'arte del cantastorie», Italica, vol. 72, n. 2, 1995, pp. 155-173, p. 158. As for Sarraute, on this topic see the paragraph "le refus d'un certain type d'autobiographie" in Monique Gosselin op. cit., pp. 20-29. Canetti was a great reader of memoirs, and he has always been interested in biographies, in particular in the relationship between life and work. His interest can be detected through the essays he wrote on figures such as Kafka, Hitler's architect Albert Speer or his recollection of the history of a doctor in Hiroshima (all the essays are today in the collection of essays The Conscience of Words). In Canetti's case, it is interesting what he wrote in his notes while working on his own autobiographical trilogy. In 1975 he writes: «He does not want to invent a life in detail and therefore writes his own» Elias Canetti, The Secret Heart of the Clock. Notes Aphorisms and Fragments, Farrar, Straus Giroux, New York, 1989, p. 19. According to Youssef Ishaghpour, Canetti's desire to write an autobiography comes from having spent a good part of his career trying to understand phenomena such as crowd and power, an experience that «l'ha lasciato sguarnito e impoverito alle soglie della vecchiaia, quando il senso dell'avvenire si assottiglia e arriva l'ora dei bilanci» Canetti wants «riassumersi, prima di dissolversi» [has left him disempowered and impoverished at the threshold of old age, when the sense of the future thins out and the hour of reckoning arrives] Canetti therefore wants, according to Ishaghpour, [to sum himself up, before dissolving] Youssef Ishaghpour, op. cit., p. 157.

understand some of the motivations underlying the construction of an unstable and multiple narrative identity and to find in the three texts, what Adam Piette – in a study dedicated to sound and memory – has defined as «a kind of literary practice, a mimesis that hears as well as sees the murmurs of the mind, a difficult music of remembered connotations and selves fugitively united»<sup>396</sup>.

What I will try to bring to light in the following paragraphs is a reading that – focusing on a few but significant textual extracts – contextualises in an oto-bio-graphic context such elements as: the interweaving of the discourse of lived experience and the discourse of imagination; the explicit questioning of the issue of memory; the metatextual reflection contained in the autodiegetic discourse; and finally, the practice of a lacunar and incoherent writing, translating the fragmentary vision of being, of the world and of the self.

As we investigated, memory processes take on particular importance in twentieth century childhood narratives. As Enrico Testa notes, memory is «costituita da bagliori e frammenti particolari»<sup>397</sup> and its functioning becomes one of the main categories of investigation in the autobiographical writing:

In its practical form, memory lacks an organization that predisposes it to intervene at the right moment. It is mobilised in relation to what happens – a surprise that manages to turn into an opportunity. It positions itself in the other through a chance encounter. Like birds that lay their

<sup>397</sup> [memory is made up of flashes and particular fragments] Enrico Testa, op. cit., p. 137.

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>396</sup> Adam Piette, *Remembering and the Sound of Words. Mallarmé, Proust, Joyce, Beckett*, Clarindon Press, Oxford, 1996, p. 45.

eggs only in the nests of other species, memory generates something in a place that is not its own. It receives its form and place from an extraneous circumstance, even though the content (the missing detail) comes from it. Its mobilisation is inseparable from an alteration. Moreover, its strength of intervention comes from its very ability to be altered – movable, mobile, without a fixed place<sup>398</sup>

It is clear, therefore, that to give harmony to the fragment that emerges from memory and to transform it into a narrative, it is necessary for the writer to regulate memories through an externally imposed arrangement, an alteration through which the memory can be transformed into a tale.

In the three works analysed, the marker of memory that restores reenactment to the present time is language: as Ludwig Wittgenstein wrote in his 1914-1916 Notebooks: «Words are probes; some reach very deep; some only to a little depth. [...] The older a word, the deeper it reaches»<sup>399</sup>. For the Austrian philosopher, words – in some cases – manage to go beyond the surface of things. Wittgenstein's praise of words links the revealing capacity of language to its oldness and, consequently, to the stratification of meanings it has assumed over time.

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>398</sup> «Nella sua forma pratica, la memoria non ha un'organizzazione che la predisponga a intervenire nel momento giusto. Essa si mobilita in relazione a quanto accade – una sorpresa, che riesce a trasformare in occasione. Va a collocarsi nell'altro attraverso un incontro fortuito. Come gli uccelli che depongono le uova solo nel nido di altre specie, la memoria genera qualcosa in un luogo che non le è proprio. Riceve da una circostanza estranea la sua forma e il suo luogo, anche se il contenuto (il dettaglio mancante) proviene da essa. La sua mobilitazione è indissociabile da un'alterazione. Non solo, ma la sua forza di intervento la trae dalla sua stessa capacità di essere alterata – spostabile, mobile, senza luogo fisso.» Enrico Testa, op. cit., p. 136.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>399</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Notebooks 1914-1916*, Harper and Brothers, New York, 1961, pp. 39-40.

Our three authors move in the complicated dialectic of estrangement and rapprochement represented by two poles. On the one hand that of the spoken word, of orality, of the innocent and childlike listening to the words "of the grown-ups". On the other hand, they rearrange – in the space of memory – the echo of those lost speeches through the artificial organ of narrative writing. It is precisely in the need to reconcile two contradictory motion principles, namely the return to lived experience and the artistic creation, that self-narratives emerge.

Natalia Ginzburg writes «la memoria è amorosa e non è mai casuale. Essa affonda le radici nella nostra stessa vita» 400. According to the writer, memory is connected to a lived past, to a childlike and nostalgic dimension of experience. The "loving memory" moves in the spaces of the past, in infantine sensations among the rubble of things that have disappeared. As Minghelli, while discussing the concept of "daily life" in *Lessico famigliare*, points out:

The house of memory is the home of childhood desires, the shadow of a lost daily life inhabited by things and people that have disappeared due to the exile imposed on the subject by time. Lessico famigliare, inhabiting the space and time contained in this house, recovers the poetics of childhood that elects the everyday, "the simple things, made of nothing, the things you look at" and "the simple sentences you hear" as the subject of writing. Representing what every

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>400</sup> [memory is loving and is never accidental. It is rooted in our own life] Natalia Ginzburg, *Prefazione*, in: Id., *Cinque romanzi brevi*, Einaudi, Torino, 2005.

representation usually disregards (the visibility and audibility of the world), is the implicit challenge in the narrative<sup>401</sup>

Natalia Ginzburg's challenge is therefore to recover "the simple phrases that one hears", the usual, everyday expressions that give rhythm to a family's life and history.

Ginzburg has famously claimed that the book virtually wrote itself: «Lessico famigliare is a book of pure, naked, uncovered and self-declared memory. I do not know if it is the best of my books: but it is certainly the only one I have written in a state of absolute freedom. Writing it was for me entirely like speaking» 402. This statement leads to the expectation of a free, unstructured narrative. To some extent, the text appears to be such, with its seemingly random breaks between loosely connected passages of prose of varying length, its hazy cronology, and its eccentric selection of subjects deemed worthy of narration. There is a basic chronology consisting of the life-stories of the granparents, the life stories of Natalia's parents, the period of the author's childhood and adolescence, the years of fascism and war, and the post-war era. The shifts in time in the narrative follow a pattern based on the natural itinerary of memory.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>401</sup> «La casa della memoria è la casa di desideri infantili, l'ombra di una quotidianità perduta inabitata da cose e persone scomparse a causa dell'esilio imposto al soggetto dal tempo. *Lessico famigliare*, abitando lo spazio e il tempo contenuto in questa casa, recupera la poetica dell'infanzia che elegge il quotidiano, "le cose semplice, fatte di niente, le cose che si guardano" e "le semplice frasi che si sentono" a soggetto della scrittura. Rappresentare ciò che usualmente ogni rappresentazione prescinde (la visibilità e l'udibilità del mondo), è la sfida implicita nel racconto» Giuliana Minghelli, art. cit., p. 156.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>402</sup> «*Lessico Famigliare* è un romanzo di pura, nuda, scoperta e dichiarata memoria. Non so se sia il migliore dei miei libri: ma certo è il solo che io abbia scritto in stato di assoluta libertà. Scriverlo era per me del tutto come parlare» Natalia Ginzburg, *Cinque romanzi brevi*, op. cit., p. 17.

In the *Preface*, Ginzburg explains that: «The places, events and people in this book are real. I have invented nothing, and each time that my old habits as a novelist led me to invent something, I at once felt compelled to erase whatever I had invented»<sup>403</sup>. These initial assertions seem to anchor the text firmly to reality, but immediately after claiming to have distanced herself decisively from her "old habits as a novelist", Ginzburg partly contradicts what she has just stated. The writer declares:

I have written only what I remember, so if this book is read as a factual account it could be objected that it is full of gaps. Even though I am dealing with real life, I think it ought to be read as a novel; in other words, without asking either more or less of it than a novel can give<sup>404</sup>

It is the writer herself who declares that memory, not fantasy or even reality, dictated the content of the text. Given the partiality and fragility of a collection of memories' textual structure, the book appears to participate in both the autobiographical and fictional genres. However, another clarification intervenes to disenchant the reader: *Lessico famigliare* is a text built around memory, but it is a selective memory that excludes from the recollections everything that refers to the narrator's person:

And there are also many things which I remember, but have omitted to write about, including many which concern me personally. I have not really wanted to talk about myself. This is not in fact my story but rather, despite gaps and omissions, the story of my family<sup>405</sup>

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>403</sup> Natalia Ginzburg, *Preface*, in: Id., *The things we used to say*, op. cit., p.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>404</sup> Ibid.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>405</sup> Ibid.

The forewarning discloses several interesting aspects: on the one hand, it makes explicit the bottom-up and childish perspective, and on the other, it emphasises the perceptive dimension of the experience. Finally, as Elisabetta Abignente notes, through the forewarning, the writer operates a «deliberate marginalisation of the self»<sup>406</sup>. The narrative, given its «internal balance between lateral space granted to the narrating self and centrality granted to the other family members – siblings, parents, grandparents – who turn out to be the real protagonists of the story»<sup>407</sup>, from the very first lines, moves away from the autobiographical genre, embracing instead that of family novel, in a «interstitial dimension between individual and universal, private and public, personal and collective, one and multiple»<sup>408</sup>.

This «deliberata ellissi del sé»<sup>409</sup> runs through the entire narrative. The narrative of *Lessico famigliare* is punctuated by silences, despite being infused with the subtle humour characteristic of Ginzburg's prose. The silences frequently correspond to the most painful parts of the story, e. g., when history breaks into the daily life. At the same time, silences coincide with the moments in the story when things happen to the protagonist<sup>410</sup>,

 $<sup>^{406}</sup>$  «deliberata messa ai margini dell'io» Elisabetta Abignente, *Rami nel tempo*, op. cit., p. 5.

<sup>407 «</sup>equilibrio interno tra spazio laterale concesso all'io narrante e centralità accordata agli altri membri della famiglia – fratelli, genitori, nonni – che risultano essere i veri protagonisti della storia» Ibid. p. 7

<sup>408 «</sup>dimensione interstiziale tra individuale e universale, privato e pubblico, personale e collettivo, uno e molteplice» Ibid., p. 6.

Elisabetta Abignente, «Memorie di famiglia. Un genere ibrido del romanzo contemporaneo», *Enthymema*, n. 20, 2017, pp. 7-17, p. 8.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>410</sup> An emblematic example is the death of Leone Ginzburg, Natalia's husband who was tortured and killed at the end of the war by the Nazis in the Regina Coeli prison in Rome. The entire event is recounted as follows: «On his office wall, the publisher had hung a photograph of Leone, with his head slightly stooped, his spectacles low on his nose, his thick black hair, the deep clefts in his cheecks and his feminine hand. Leone had died in prison, in the German wing of Regina Coeli prison in Rome, one icy February during the German occupation» p.

namely the topics on which an autobiography is usually built on. In these moments, Ginzburg's writing does not say anything, it suggests, because behind it one glimpses something unspoken, which nevertheless exists. Similarly to Sarraute's tropismatic sensations, Ginzburg's communicative clarity «makes sincerity, the ultimate in sincerity, coincide with reticence» thus, her narrator is «mute so to speak, the more she speaks» Using an example from the field of painting, Minghelli considers the text as: «written through an operation of subtraction and created through the definition of what in drawing is called negative space, the space that imprisons the figure in the world» In my point of view, the narrator is not absent, but can be considered an echo-chamber. Through her orality-related style and the polyphony of her storytelling, she embodies all the voices she narrates.

If Elisabetta Aginente rightly saw in *Lessico famigliare* not so much an autobiography as one of the most fitting examples of the genre of "memorie di famiglia"<sup>414</sup>, it is interesting for our analysis to dwell on what

'memorie di famiglia", it is interesting for our analysis to dwell on what

<sup>147.</sup> Leone's death is crystallised in the description of a picture, and his death is a record of a date and location. The story then immediately resumes where it left off. The personal trauma is framed and contained in the narrative so that its subjective content does not contaminate the continuation of the story. Such textual leaps, which unexpectedly move the story backwards and forwards in time, remove it from any existential parable inspired by prevent any lingering or digression on the subject. On this topic see: Judith Woolf, «Silent Witness: Memory and Omission in Natalia Ginzburg's "Family Sayings"», *The Cambridge Quarterly*, 1996, Vol. 25, No. 3 (1996), pp. 243-262.

<sup>411 «</sup>fa coincidere la sincerità, il massimo della sincerità, con la reticenza» Cesare Garboli in: Natalia Ginzburg, *Opere*, vol. 2, Mondadori, Milano, 1992, p. 1579.

<sup>412 «</sup>muto per così dire, quanto più parla» Ibid.

<sup>413 «</sup>scritta attraverso un'operazione di sottrazione, e creata attraverso la definizione di ciò che in disegno e chiamato spazio negativo, lo spazio che imprigiona la figura nel mondo» Giuliana Minghelli, art. cit., p. 159.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>414</sup> See: Elisabetta Abignente, *Rami nel tempo*, op. cit.

constitutes, in fact, this story made up of stories. We share here the interpretation of Minghelli who states:

The text is not a story in the sense of a chronicle, due to the gaps that characterise it, and it is not even a narrative because nothing it contains is fictitious. In this case, I believe that the term "story" should be read in its oldest sense, a meaning that can be traced back to the medieval tradition of the storytellers of Novellino. The story of the Levi family is a story made up of stories, a story marked by a process of storytelling that, far from following any temporal development (a plot with a beginning, middle, and end), capriciously and inexorably follows its own secret rhythm, returning to itself multiple times<sup>415</sup>

Through Minghelli's quote, it is possible to reconnect with the "contemporaneity of the past" and with the metaphor of the ear that we evoked in the introduction to this work. The ear, the maze-like organ, can be seen as a metaphor for self-writing: an entirely circular and labyrinthine space where "being" is at the same time "becoming" and lived life is relived through writing. As Cesare Garboli notices:

When Ginzburg wrote Lessico famigliare, abandoning imaginary stories for memories, she was visited by a

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>415</sup> «Il testo non è una storia nel senso di cronaca a causa delle lacune che lo caratterizzano, e non è neppure un racconto perché nulla che contiene è fittizio. Penso che in questo caso il termine "storia" vada letto nel suo significato più antico, un significato che va fatto risalire alla tradizione medievale dei cantastorie del Novellino. La storia della famiglia Levi è una storia fatta di storie, una storia scandita da un'operazione di raccontar storie che lungi dal rispettare un qualsiasi svolgimento temporale (una trama con inizio, centro e fine) segue capricciosamente, ma dovremmo aggiungere anche inesorabilmente, il suo proprio ritmo segreto ritornando più volte su se stessa» Giuliana Minghelli, art. cit., p. 159.

revelation: novels pre-exist their writers; in order to bring them to life, to give them a shape – the body – one must "set them to music", make music from the air (a form from the block), and subtract, subtract, never stop subtracting. One must take from one's past experiences the flour, the cream, the vocality, the humming, the noise of life going on... But to whom do the "memories" belong? *Lessico famigliare* is not written by an adult who revisits the past out of love for the past, and it is not written by an adult (like Proust) who questions Time so as to meet himself; it is written by a child who has already seen everything: Ginzburg's already seen everything: Ginzburg's memories are a fiction: they are memories "on loan", that can be used for an investment in the imaginary<sup>416</sup>

In Ginzburg's poetics, the time of childhood circularly returns and is experienced as if it were present. A theory, which, as we shall see shortly, is corroborated by the structure of the text itself.

Let us briefly return to Ginzburg's initial statement: the writer states that the text was written following the functioning of her memory. In the opinion of several critics, however, the story, far from being simply dictated by memory, instead presents an elaborate internal architecture, which seems almost to recall a musical rather than a literary construction. According to Simborowski, statements and silences appear to be «part of a stylistic device

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>416</sup> Cesare Garboli quoted in: Luigi Fontanella, «Natalia Ginzburg between Fiction and Memory: A Reading of Le voci della sera and Lessico Famigliare», art. cit., p. 39.

inspired by the idioms of music»<sup>417</sup>. So there seems to be music in the text, despite the narrating voice's denial of any musical ability or inclination<sup>418</sup>.

Domenico Scarpa recognises that the alternating intonations in Ginzburg's childhood memories form a «charade enchaînée»<sup>419</sup>, and states: «In these pages, howling and singing are side by side, and are mutually necessary: they represent domestic speech pushed to its two extremes. The

<sup>417</sup> Nicoletta Simborowski, «Music and memory in Natalia Ginzburg's *Lessico Famigliare*», *The Modern Language Review*, vol. 94, n. 3, 1999, pp. 680-690, p. 681. Simborowski is not the only one to use musical metaphors to talk about the book, on this subject see also: Clara Borrelli «Lirismo Narrativo di Natalia Ginzburg», *Annali dell'Istituto Universitario Orientale*, vol. xxix, n. 2, 1987, pp. 289-310.

<sup>418</sup> Natalia Ginzburg has repeatedly stated that she has no passion for music. In Lessico famigliare, Natalia describes her mother as a great lover of opera, a passion that she is unable to pass on to her children. In the scenes described, music seems to the child Natalia almost an obligation that is difficult to bear: «My mother always hoped that at least one of her children would become a musician like Silvio, a hope that remained disappointed since we all displayed a complete insensitivity to music and when we tried to sing we were hopelessly out of tune [...] As for me and my brothers, whenever they tried to take us to a concert we invariably fell aspleep, and if we were taken to the opera we would complain about 'all that music which stops you from hearing the words'. Once my mother took me to hear Madam Butterfly. I had the Children's Journal with me and I read the whole time, trying to decipherthe words by the faint illumination from the stage and putting my hands over my ears to block out the noise» (Ginzburg, The things we used to say, op. cit., p. 18). Also, very interesting from this point of view is the short story *He and I*, in which, describing her second husband's passion for music, Ginzburg states: «If I loved music I would love it passionately. But I don't understand it, and when he persuades me to go to concerts with him my mind wanders off and I think of my own affairs. Or I fall sound asleep [...] It doesn't matter to me that I don't understand painting or the figurative arts, but it hurts me that I don't love music, and I feel that my mind suffers from the absence of this love. But there is nothing I can do about it, I will never understand or love music. If I occasionally hear a piece of music that I like I don't know how to remember it; and how can I love something that I can't remember?» Natalia Ginzburg, He and I, in: Id., The Little Virtues, op. cit., p. 41.

<sup>419</sup> [chained charade] Domenico Scarpa, *Natalia Ginzburg. Pour un portrait de la tribu*, op. cit., p. 17.

narrative obeys both a musical and a legislative principle. Les mots de la tribu is a book with a deceptive appearance of simplicity, a symphony camouflaged as a solfeggio. Music, Law: the fact that this novel of real events is a book of oxymorons is something that one does not realise at first reading, but which is written in its title» $^{420}$ .

Borrelli further notices that the dialogical structure accompanies the narration by following a musical pattern, since «the dialogue dissolves into soft music, now vivacious, now slow, until the affectionate adagio of the last pages»<sup>421</sup>. Minghelli, while generally agreeing with the analysis provided by Borrelli, adds that: «rather than accompanying the narration like a musical commentary (pure writing deaf to music?), the dialogue engages in a counterpoint with it that gives life to the allegro non troppo of the text»<sup>422</sup>. If according to Borrelli, therefore, the dialogue constitutes in the text a true mute music, according to Minghelli it is a counterpoint to the chronicle style of narrative. While I agree with the perspective of a generic musical organisation of the text, I particularly acknowledge Simborowski's opinion, who notes a different kind of musicality in Ginzburg's text:

It is not the euphony of poetry or poetic prose as we usually understand the "music" of words to be, but the

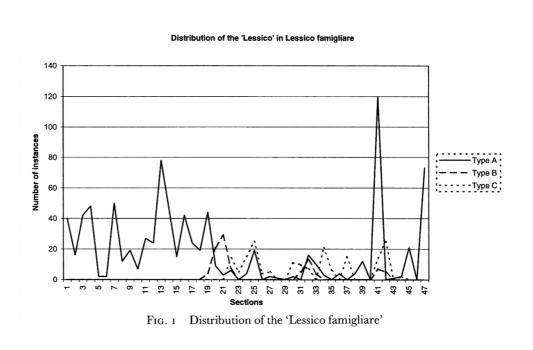
<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>420</sup> «Dans ces pages le hurlement et le chant se côtoient, et sont l'un à l'autre nécessaires : ils représentent la parole domestique poussée à ses deux extrêmes. Le récit obéit conjointement à un principe musical et à un principe législatif. *Les Mots de la tribu* est un livre à la trompeuse apparence de simplicité, une symphonie camouflée en solfège. Musique, Loi : que ce roman de faits réels soit un livre d'oxymores, voilà une chose dont on ne s'avise pas à première lecture, mais qui est inscrite dans son titre» Ibid.

<sup>421 «</sup>il dialogo si dissolve in musica sommessa, ora vivace, ora lenta, fino all'adagio affettuoso delle ultime pagine» Clara Borrelli, art. cit.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>422</sup> «piuttosto che accompagnare come un commento musicale la narrazione (pura scrittura sorda alla musica?), il dialogo intraprende con lei un contrappunto come nel suo insieme dà vita all'allegro non troppo del testo» Minghelli, art cit., p. 172.

presence and mingling of two distinct and very different "voices", one providing the "lessico" and the other speaking as the detached chronicler<sup>423</sup>

According to Simborowski, the "music" of the text lies in the interplay petween the two kinds of style but would place a different emphasis on the effect of the contrast: when the music of the "lessico" stops, logically there is silence, so that the passages of sustained narrative without "lessico" are the equivalent of silence or take place against silence. The scholar graphically presents the instances of the Levi family's lexicon. Entries defined as type A are those relating to Natalia's childhood: recurring phrases made up above all by her parent's usual sayings, by invented words, or dialect-influenced utterances:



First, the graph Simborowski proposes is useful to define the course of the narrative from a thematic point of view. As can be seen, instances of the "family lexicon" are frequent in the first part of the narrative, as the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>423</sup> Nicoletta Simborowski, art. cit., p. 682.

initial scenes are all related to the childhood of the protagonist. According to Simborowski, this structure makes Ginzburg's work a "concerto made up of words":

If we return to the musical metaphor, then, the "lessico" is neither continual background music nor exactly a counterpoint. It should instead be seen as the themes or melodies of part of a larger piece of music: the book can be viewed as a concerto made up of words. The main melodies are presented in the early part of the book; variations based on new melodies appear throughout the course of the work; there is a "largo" section, where the melodies disappear altogether and a sombre mood takes over (wartime events and particularly Leone's death), and finally a "coda", where the early melodies are played again with their final modulations (conveyed by the change to the passato remoto, which has the same effect as the resolving harmonies at the close of a piece of music). I would argue that contrary to other interpretations of this "music", the effect of the absence of the "lessico" in any of its forms is one not only of sadness and calm but actually of silence. If it is true that this is a piece of "avant-garde" music that makes use of silent moments, this silence accords with the philosophy of silence that surrounds Ginzburg's approach to traumatizing events<sup>424</sup>

These expressions return powerfully in the last part of the story. What happens in between is the period of the war, the one studded with silences. What Simborowski notes is that, while the reader eventually

witnesses a "return to normality" even in the way of speaking, what changes inexorably, however, are the verb tenses.

One might expect a return of this "lessico" at the end for reasons of artistic symmetry with the opening of the book, but in these final pages they are also expressed with the passato remoto: instead of "diceva", "disse" etc. This has a dual effect: the Type A 'lessico' reinforces the impression of a return to normality for the Levi parents, but the passato remoto conveys a sense of the closing of that chapter of Natalia's life. She leaves her parents behind, contented, but static in their old life, whilst she embarks on an independent life of her own and no doubt a new personal "lessico" 425

Simborowski's structure suggests two main lines of investigation: on the one hand, it allows to notice a certain circular architecture in the narration that moves away from the writer's intention to write a novel of "bare memory," but reveals its purely authorial and aesthetic traits and the author's artistic project.

The key to this system can be found in the "silences" scattered throughout the text, which, while representing the course of memory, are also a work of voluntary selection by the author. In the case of *Lessico famigliare*, however, it is precisely through the change of verb tenses that the protagonist's consciousness emerges.

The distribution of the "lessico" mimics the structure of a concerto, with a disturbing silence and stillness at its heart, but this very silence emphasizes the gravity and the pain of the events elided. The lack of detail and information

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>425</sup> Ibid., p. 684.

is in itself troubling, but this effect is compounded by the absence of the "melodies" of the "lessico", achieving a silence of style as well as content. The same effect is achieved with all the narrative that is in the "chronicle" style in *Lessico famigliare*, the direct narrative, but rather than it being a "contrappunto", it is a silence; the music stops, and silence in a piece of music is far more shocking and striking than any other acoustic effect. So Ginzburg mirrors the idea of silence in testimony with an imitation of a musical effect. If we look at the passages where the music stops (if I may express it like that), they are when the tragic events in the book are narrated. These passages have a poetry of their own, entirely in keeping with the subject-matter<sup>426</sup>

A number of elements characteristic of oto-bio-graphy can thus be found in the general structure of *Lessico famigliare*. To begin with, the subject loses its centrality to make room for both the other's ear (this appears to be the function of the *Avvertenza*, namely a warning to the reader) and the other-in-itself (the familiar voices), proposing a true rhythmic construction of the self, as Simborowski has shown in her analysis.

To continue a discussion based on acoustic-musical metaphors, it is interesting to note how Philippe Lejeune defines *Enfance* by Nathalie Sarraute as a "book to be listened to":

Enfance is a book to be heard, a chamber of echoes. It is a work on voice: the oral in the written form, with the dizzying depths of field and the most subtle fades allowed by the use of reported speech in an autobiographical text. It is a

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>426</sup> Nicoletta Simborowski, art. cit., p. 686.

childhood narrative without the simple past or semicolons...<sup>427</sup>

According to Lejeune, who, in his analysis, emphasizes the innovative characteristics of Sarraute's work: «le sens du texte est dans sa forme»<sup>428</sup>, a form that should be read as a musical score and asks for an analysis based on rhythm:

An analysis of the rhythmic variations of tension and density created by the dialogue throughout the book is necessary. Music brings it back to the essence, to the voice. The use of dialogue establishes the text's orality from the very first line. Through it, the narrator is already integrated into the universe of voices that will resurrect<sup>429</sup>

According to the scholar, *Enfance*'s prose is a kind of dosage between the written and the spoken, of varying proportions depending on the chapters. The structure of the text both graphically and content-wise translates the fragmentary vision of reality that characterises Sarraute's entire oeuvre. The text is made up of seventy discontinuous sequences that give the impression of a disjointed narrative. The fragments are unnumbered and untitled and are separated by numerous blanks. Already from the title it

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>427</sup> «*Enfance* est un livre à entendre, une chambre d'échos. Un travail sur la voix : l'oral dans l'écrit, avec les vertigineuses profondeurs de champ (ou de chant) et les fondus les plus subtils qu'autorise l'emploi du discours rapporté dans un texte autobiographique. Un récit d'enfance sans passé simple ni point-virgule…» Philippe Lejeune, *Les brouillons de soi*, Seuil, Paris, 1998, p. 255.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>428</sup> Ibid., p. 284.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>429</sup> «c'est une analyse rythmique qu'il faudrait faire, tout au long du livre, des variations de tension et de densité opérées par le dialogue. Et la musique me ramène à l'essentiel, à la voix. Le procédé du dialogue installe le texte dès la première ligne dans l'oralité. Grâce à lui, le narrateur est intégré par avance à l'univers des voix qu'il va ressusciter» Ibid., p. 271.

is possible to understand the hidden intentions of the author. As Keiling Wei notes:

By "Enfance", an elliptical title, without an article, without a possessive pronoun, without a qualifier, the writer does not only designate a fleeting period of life or of her life - therein lies an ambiguity: a narrative about childhood in general/an autobiographical narrative -; she also uses the word metaphorically, tending to infantilize the discourse in order to explore a secret state of the language. The experimentation towards a childhood of language is conducted in the linguistic exercise of childhood narrative: childhood of language and language of childhood. Looking at the microscopic dramas, rehearsing the infinite echoes of words refracted through the child's body, the author gives herself the means to study language in its nascent state. Enfance becomes the propitious place where voices and languages meet and even confront each other. Elusive, the child's voice haunts the adult's discourse, resists it, provokes it. The haunting and evasion are both a challenge and a fascination - a tension that underlies the "childhood narrative". The intervention of the childhood voice in the uses non-logocentric forms: narrative fragmentation, incoherence, superimposition <sup>430</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>430</sup> «Par "Enfance", titre elliptique, sans article, sans pronom possessif, sans qualificatif, l'écrivaine ne désigne pas seulement une période passagère de la vie ou de sa vie — là déjà réside une ambiguïté : récit sur l'enfance en général/récit autobiographique — ; elle emploie aussi le mot de manière métaphorique, elle tend à infantiliser le discours pour explorer un état secret de la langue. L'expérimentation vers une enfance de la langue est conduite dans l'exercice langagier du récit d'enfance : enfance de la langue et langue de l'enfance. Se

Wei's interpretation establishes several intriguing characteristics for my perspective. Already from the title, the text takes the neutral form of an investigation into childhood tropisms. Not just of one's own childhood, but of childhood in general. Childhood, that period of life of pure perception, becomes the terrain on which Sarraute decodes language, language that the child does not (yet) possess.

Sarraute faces the same paradox as feminist philosophers who challenged the symbolic order: how to express – through language – that which transcends language? Sarraute's intent is clear from the very first pages. It is about finding something «still vacillating, no written word, no word of any sort has yet touched it [...] outside words [...] little bits of something still alive»<sup>431</sup>. They must be said, written down in words. One must find the words, that is to say, invent with the words. One of the techniques through which Sarraute makes explicit the difficulty of expressing sensations through language is epanorthosis, i.e., the rhetorical figure consisting of taking a word, mostly expressing a judgement, and replacing it with another more precise and appropriate one:

...at that moment, it happened... something unique... something that will never again happen in that way, a

penchant sur les drames microscopiques, ressassant les échos infinis des paroles réfractées à travers le corps de l'enfant, l'auteure se donne les moyens d'étudier la langue à l'état naissant. L'enfance devient le lieu propice où se rencontrent, voire se confrontent les voix et les langues. Insaisissable, la voix de l'enfant hante le discours de l'adulte, lui résiste, le provoque. La hantise et la dérobade constituent à la fois un défi et une fascination — une tension qui sous-tend le « récit d'enfance ». L'intervention de la voix d'enfance dans le récit met en œuvre des formes non logocentriques : fragmentation, incohérence, surimpression» Keiling Wei, «Pluralité des voix et repentirs autobiographiques : une Lecture d'*Enfance* de Nathalie Sarraute», *Études françaises*, vol. 40, n. 2, 2014, pp. 101-114, pp. 103-104.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>431</sup> Nathalie Sarraute, *Childhood*, op. cit., p. 3.

sensation of such violence that, even now, after so much time has elapsed, when it comes back to me, faded and partially obliterated, I feel... but what? What word can pin it down? Not the all-encompassing word: "happiness", which is the first that comes to mind, no, not that... "felicity," "exaltation," are too ugly, they mustn't touch it... and "ecstasy"... at this word, everything in it recoils... "Joy," yes, perhaps... this modest, very simple little word may alight on it with no great danger... but it cannot gather up what fills me, brims over me, disperses, dissolves, melts into the pink bricks the blossom-covered espaliers, the lawn, the pink and white petals, the air vibrating with barely perceptible tremors, with waves... waves of life, quite simply of life, what other word?... of life in its pure state, no lurking menace, no mixture, it suddenly attains the greatest intensity it can ever attain... never again that kind of intensity, for no reason, just because it is there, because I am inside it, inside the little pink wall, the flowers on the espaliers, on the trees, the lawn, the vibrating air... I am inside them with nothing else, nothing that does not belong to them, nothing that belongs to me<sup>432</sup>

One word would not be enough, would be insufficient to describe a sensation. This is why Sarraute employs a whole series of synonyms to remotely succeed in describing the infantile sensation, amplifying its resonant effect. Similarly, the suspension dots and lexical uncertainties depict the formation of a thought, a moment of both childish and authorial creation.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>432</sup> Ibid., 56-57.

At the same time, words seem to have a life of their own, they come alive with a violent force, they have a strong power: «the word strikes you like a whiplash. Straps wind themselves around me, crush me...»<sup>433</sup>. Writing is constituted as movement, in a delicate process of collaboration and resistance to the power of words. As Wei states:

It is also and above all the movement of writing in the process of seeking and formulating itself. It is indeed a writing in the process of becoming: becoming-language, becoming-narrative. We can discern the archaeological work in the process of uncovering, from the depths of obscure memories [...]; the hermeneutic work of reading and deciphering; the linguistic work of searching for words and manipulating language; the critical and analytical work, finally, which oversees and comments on the act of writing, calling it into question. This is how the text advances: groping, hesitating, stammering [...]. The narrative moves at an intermittent pace, cut up not only by the alternation of the two voices, but also by the suspension points, which halt, interrupt the enunciation, hold in abeyance what would have been said, what could have been said, replace them with the unsaid, the not-yet-said, and give rise to the implied, the misunderstood<sup>434</sup>

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>433</sup> Ibid., p. 106.

<sup>434 «</sup>C'est aussi et surtout le mouvement de l'écriture en train de se chercher et de se formuler. Il s'agit bien d'une écriture en devenir: devenir-langue, devenir-narration. On y discerne le travail archéologique en train de dégager, du fond des souvenirs obscurs [...]; le travail herméneutique qui fait la lecture et le déchiffrement; le travail linguistique qui cherche les mots et manie la langue; le travail critique et analytique, enfin, qui survole, commente le geste d'écrire, le remet en cause. C'est ainsi que le texte avance: tâtonnant, hésitant, balbutiant [...].

In addition to the discontinuity of the narrative, one of Sarraute's new means of expression in *Enfance*, is her use of two opposing voices which never cease conversing: the voice of the narrator who tells the reader about the protagonist's life and the voice of a double psychic critic who regularly interrupts the narration to warn the narrator against the preestablished patterns which account for adulteration of autobiography.

As in Ginzburg's writing, a writing in which dialogue is «a necessary tool for memory»<sup>435</sup>, dialogue is for Sarraute the only verbal means to access to the pre-verbal meaning of things. The dialogue between the two instances of the self is a unique "autobiographical pact" that deviates from the tradition of monophonic autobiographical discourse by presenting both the narrated self (*erzählte Zeit*) and the self contemporaneous with the writing (*Erzählzeit*) in an inner dialogic exchange in which Sarraute merges the traditional retrospective perspective with a more purely introspective one.

This is one of the strategies of *Nouvelle Autobiographie*, a type of autobiographical writing that « aims to describe psychic life at the level of the moment and to reproduce a multiplicity of voices giving rise to a writing of confusion» in which « the story told and the act of telling merge to the point where temporal and spatial locations are imperceptible»<sup>436</sup>. Therefore,

La narration va à un rythme intermittent, découpée non seulement par l'alternance des deux voix, mais aussi par les points de suspension, qui font arrêt, interrompent l'énonciation, tiennent en suspens ce qui aurait été dit, ce qui pourrait être dit, les remplacent par le non-dit, le pas-encore-dit, et donnent naissance aux sous-entendus, aux mal-entendus» Keiling Wei, art. cit., p. 113.

<sup>435 «</sup>strumento necessario alla memoria stessa» Elena Clementelli, op. cit., p. 79.

<sup>436 «</sup>se propose de décrire la vie psychique au niveau de l'instant et de reproduire une multiplicité des voix donnant naissance à une écriture de confusion [...] l'histoire racontée et l'acte de raconter s'y confondent au point que les localisations temporelles et spatiales sont imperceptibles » Edit Bors, «Dilatation

in *Nouvelle Autobiographie*, the two temporal planes – the story told and the act of telling – are frequently imperceptibly merged.

According to Jean Pierrot, the dialogue contains this merging of temporal plans, making *Enfance*: «both a childhood narrative and a critical reflection on the genre of the childhood narrative itself»<sup>437</sup>. The duplication of the subject becomes in Sarraute's case an embodiment of the "suspicion" the writer had theorised many years earlier:

It is the critical consciousness that keeps an eye on the writing, exposing its inner mechanisms and developments, as well as its process. It is a trial that is ongoing, pending, and in conciliation. The trial is conducted by the critical superego. The revisions convey the movement of a double tension: on the one hand, the critical vigilance raises the metalinguistic guard; on the other hand, the becoming-work transforms the process into a performative rather than a factual one. The illusion of unification dissipates during this process, giving way to a fragmentary device of dispersion and scattering<sup>438</sup>

du temps et de l'espace: approche énonciative de «ici» et «mainetnant» dans Enfance de Nathalie Sarraute», *Verbum Analecta Neolatina*, n. XII vol. 2, 2010, p. 309.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>437</sup> «à la fois un récit d'enfance et une réflexion critique sur le genre même du récit d'enfance» Jean Pierrot, *Nathalie Sarraute*, Librairie José Corti, Paris, 1990, pp. 175-176.

<sup>438 «</sup>C'est la conscience critique qui surveille l'écriture, expose ses mécanismes et ses développements intérieurs, son processus. C'est un procèsverbal, en cours, en instance, en conciliation. Le surmoi critique fait le procès. Les repentirs impriment le mouvement d'une double tension: d'une part, la vigilance critique monte la garde métalinguistique; d'autre part, le devenir-œuvre rend le processus plus performatif que constatif. Dans ce processus, l'illusion de l'unification s'évapore, laisse place à un dispositif fragmentaire, de dispersion et d'éparpillement» Keiling Wei, art. cit., p. 113.

The double narrative voice in dialogue controls the accuracy of memory, while at the same time denouncing or exposing the problems of interpretation, linked to retrospective illusions. As we will briefly see, already in the first memory, the dialogical dimension ensures Sarraute «a permanent check on the accuracy of memory, on literary temptations, on embellishments, complacency, retrospective illusions, etc., and on the problems of interpretation»<sup>439</sup>. However, as Lejeune notes, the two voices also play directly with the reader, instilling doubt in them as to the veracity of what is being claimed: «these two voices control the real [...] they speak falsely [...] who's to say [...] that the author's real work really has anything to do with the work that the two voices mime?»<sup>440</sup>. Some critics have indeed interpreted the voice of the double as an embodiment of the implicit reader, a reader accustomed and fond of Sarraute's characters and thus already used to "suspicion" <sup>441</sup>. According to another line of interpretation, the dialogue has been compared to an exchange between «analysant et analyste»<sup>442</sup>. This perspective takes on value when one looks at the evolution of the voice of the double: at the beginning of the narration, the voice of the double

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>439</sup> «un contrôle permanent sur l'exactitude de la mémoire, sur les tentations littéraires, sur les enjolivures, les complaisances, les illusions retrospectives, etc., et sur les problems de l'interpretation» Philippe Lejeune, «L'ère du soupçon», *Le récit d'enfance en question, Cahiers de sémiotique Textuelle*, n. 12, Publidix, Paris, 1988, p. 54.

<sup>440 «</sup>ces deux voix contrôlent le vrai [...] ells parlent faux [...] qui me dit [...] que le travail reel de l'auteur ait vraiment rapport avec le travail que miment les deux voix?»Ibid.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>441</sup> According to Brulotte, the double must be understood as the "implicit reader" who is present in all of Sarraute's works: «Le lecteur fait partie de la sousconversation de l'auteur […] on lui attribue des sentiments…» Gaëtan Brulotte, «Tropismes et sous-conversation», *L'Arc*, n. 95, 1984, pp. 52-53. On this interpretation see also Monique Gosselin, "Le double et le dialogisme", in Id., op. cit., pp. 29-36.

Philippe Lejeune, «Peut-on innover en autobiographie?», *L'Autobiographie: VI Rencontres psychoanalytiques d'Aix-en-Provence 1987*, Les Belles Lettres, Paris, 1988, pp. 67-100, p. 88.

challenges that of the narrator, casting doubt on the possibility of recalling childhood memories without lapsing into literary clichés. As the story progresses, however, the second voice asks fewer questions, but its presence becomes more obtrusive. It no longer questions its double but appears to be aware of the events that have occurred as well as the emotions felt. In this sense, listening to this voice becomes internal rather than external. The voice takes on the role of a reflective conscience, attempting to unearth childhood tropisms within Sarraute's memories. The double forces the narrator to delve deeper to analyse her reactions towards others, to avoid the risks of suggestion and indoctrination, to report information on the past, and to then hesitate between a critical posture and that of an actor present at the time. Through the dialogical dimension, each sentence is analysed, weighed, evaluated for its context, its undertones, its stated or unstated objectives.

From my perspective, Sarraute succeeds in transferring to the page that theorisation that Nancy had given of his diapason-subject, since, as Lejune notes, if it is possible to give many interpretations to the function of the double in Sarraute's text, «écoute c'est la function plus feconde»<sup>443</sup>. As Lejeune notes, «il y a un brouillage des voix»<sup>444</sup> representing the author's autobiographical work in the process of being made. Rather than being merely dialogic, Sarraute's text becomes polyphonic: behind the dialogue, a vocal multiplicity is still distinguishable.

The self-referential dialogical dimension of *Enfance* thus signals the impossibility of gathering the complexity of being in the form of a "je", the impossibility of writing oneself in the first person, without at the same time denying the complexity of the self. For Sarraute, it is therefore impossible to present life as a compact whole, as the product of a single destiny. She

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>443</sup> Philippe Lejeune, *Les Brouillons de soi*, op. cit., p. 270.

<sup>444</sup> Ibid.

believes that being is incommensurable, «complexe, tellement fluctuant, tellement incertain» that it is impossible to impose an identity on it, whatever it may be. She says: «Everyone is like me [...] on some level [...] we are all like each other, [...] we all have these inner movements»<sup>445</sup>. Rather than speaking of a double, then, it would be more accurate to speak of a multiple of the author: a crowd of inner instances coexisting simultaneously. Within this teeming community, there are those who judge the autobiographical enterprise with suspicion; those who seem oblivious and curious about the substance of memories and those who instead correct them with mature wisdom and punctiliousness; those who are prudent and rationalise an overly violent emotion, those who forbid the sublimating work of writing and those who, on the contrary, encourage it with seductive tones. A numerous and complex inner population thus comes alive on the page: for Sarraute, the choice to evoke childhood memories means giving a "corps sonore" (to use another of Nancy's definitions) to all the multiform contradictions that inhabit the subject, emptying it of its identity at the very moment when she is about to transfer it in writing.

«The story of my life is not really about me. But who will believe that?»<sup>446</sup>. According to what we just said about Natalia Ginzburg and Nathalie Sarraute, this sentence could have been easily said by one of the two. It is instead written in one of Canetti's 1980's notes. This statement, which in this context seems to sound almost predictable, seems strange for a writer whose autobiography, unlike the two presented so far, is structurally "classic" and almost anachronistic. The first volume covers the writer's childhood years from 1905 to 1921. The different chapters take the names of

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>445</sup> «Tout le monde me ressemble [...] sur un plan précis [...] nous nous ressemblons tous, [...] nous avons tous ces mouvements intérieurs» Nathalie Sarraute, quoted in: Alan J. Clayton, *Nathalie Sarraute ou le tremblement de l'écriture*, Archives des lettres modernes, Paris, 1989, p. 58.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>446</sup> Elias Canetti, *The Secret Heart of the Clock*, op. cit., p. 73.

the different cities in which the author lived during those years, and the events narrated almost always follow a chronological order.

The criticism developed around Canetti's autobiographical trilogy has often noted a certain «Discrepancy [...] between the discontinuous course of the Jewish writer Elias Canetti's life and the coherence of his autobiography in terms of form and content»<sup>447</sup>. The kind of speculative, subversive disclaimer which, as the quotation at the beginning of this paragraph indicates, appears so frequently in the *Aufzeichnungen* is almost entirely absent from the formal *Lebensgeschichte*. However, where at first sight the autobiographical trilogy seems to be founded on the unity of its *erzählende* and *erzählte* selves, careful examination reveals that this apparent self-sufficiency masks a much more complex and plural conception of identity, which is related to Canetti's conception of "Metamorphosis" <sup>448</sup>.

In *The Secret Heart of the Clock* – the collection of notes from the years of writing the trilogy and its restless counterpoint – Canetti writes: «All the forgotten ones came to him to pick up their faces»<sup>449</sup>. Many are the references he makes to the dead, to the forgotten, to all those figures from the past that animate his memories:

Visiting the dead, establishing the locality of their life, is necessary, otherwise they disappear with uncanny rapidity.

<sup>447</sup> « Diskrepanz [...] zwischen dem diskontinuierlichen Lebensverlauf des jüdischen Schriftstellers Elias Canetti und der gestalterischen und inhaltlichen Geschlossenheit seiner Autobiographie» Frederike Eigler, *Das autobiographische* 

Werk von Elias Canetti: Verwandlung, Identitat, Machtaustibung, Stauffenburg,

Tübingen, 1988, p. 1.

448 On this topic see: Frederike Eigler op. cit., and David Darby, «A Literary Life: The Textuality of Elias Canetti's Autobiography», *Modern Austrian* 

Literature, vol. 25, n. 2, 1992, pp. 37-49.

210

<sup>449</sup> Elias Canetti, *The Secret Heart of The Clock*, op. cit., p. 115.

As soon as one touches their legitimate place, the place where they could exist if they existed, they come back to life with overwhelming speed. All of a sudden, you know again all the things you thought you had forgotten about them, you hear their talk, touch their hair, bloom in the glow of their eyes. Perhaps at the time you were never sure of the color of those eyes; now you see it without even posing the question. It is possible that everything about them is more intense now than it was; it is possible that only in this sudden flash of light do they become completely themselves. It is possible that every dead person waits for his perfection in the resurrection offered him by someone he has left behind<sup>450</sup>

As Ishaghpour notices: «In every existence, one can discover the dead that the living have fed on»<sup>451</sup>. The "dialogue" with the ghosts of the past is one of the characteristics that Abignente emphasises in delineating the narrator in the genre of "memorie di famiglia", stating:

we do not only live *after* those who have gone before us, but also *through* them. The figure of the narrator then ends up resembling, on the one hand, that of the ghost-catcher, who comes to terms with the inafferability of elusive and distant individualities, and, on the other, a ghost himself, who enjoys embodying himself from time to time in the bodies he tries to bring back to life, so much so that he can say: I am those whom I tell. In this way, that ambiguous relationship between I and we, singular and plural, which

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>450</sup> Elias Canetti, *The Secret Heart of The Clock*, op. cit., p. 81.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>451</sup> «in ogni esistenza si possono scoprire i morti dei quali chi vive si è nutrito» Youssef Ishaghpour, op. cit., p. 158.

constitutes one of the characteristic marks of family memoirs, is brought to the fore<sup>452</sup>

This narratological aspect applies perfectly to all three of our authors, but of all of them, Canetti is the one who – while keeping the self at the centre of the narrative – draws the most detailed profiles of the people close to him. That's because, Canetti had a genuine passion for human beings (*Passion für Menschen*, as he himself called it) and his deepest interests stemmed from his encounters with a varied humanity. This is the reason why – as he himself writes – the most frequent form of narration starts with portraits of individuals:

They reproach you for the cohesiveness of your biography, for the fact that everything that happens points to some later occurrence. But is there a life that does not move toward its later phases? When a man is eighty years old, he can't write the story of his life as if he had killed himself at forty. When the book he had to write, after inexpressible delays, is finally there and passes the test, he cannot for the sake of a whim act as if it were a failure. So one might hold it against you that you believe in Crowd's and Power, that its insights-despite the flippancy with which they were brushed aside-have remained valid. The story of your life was written with this conviction; its form and to a large extent its content

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<sup>452 «</sup>non si vive soltanto *dopo* chi ci ha preceduto ma anche *attraverso* di loro. La figura del narratore finisce per somigliare allora da un lato a quella dell'acchiappafantasmi, che fa i conti con l'inafferabilità di individualità sfuggenti e lontane nel tempo, dall'altra a un fantasma stesso, che si diverte a incarnarsi di volta in volta nei corpi che tenta di riportare in vita, tanto da poter dire: io *sono* coloro che racconto. Viene così portata alla massima evidenza quella relazione ambigua tra io e noi, singolare e plurale, che costituisce uno dei marchi caratteristici delle memorie di famiglia» Elisabetta Abignente, op. cit., pp. 102-103.

are determined by it. The fact that so many people appear in these pages, and that some of them occupy more space than the narrator himself, may seem confusing. But that is the only possible way to depict the reality of a life, against the powerful pull of its current<sup>453</sup>

What matters to Canetti in his narrative is the complexity of life when shaped around the encounters, whether instantaneous or long-lasting, that shape each person's existence<sup>454</sup>: «Canetti ignores the art of landscape and topography; he knows no other spaces than those created by the relations between human beings»<sup>455</sup>. Over time, Canetti's autobiographical trilogy has been regarded by critics as a kind of *Bildungsroman* or *Dichterautobiographie*<sup>456</sup>, in which the author's metamorphoses play a predominant role<sup>457</sup>. The titles of the three works together (*Die gerettete Zunge*, *Die Fackel im Ohr*, *Das Augenspiel*) outline a kind of trilogy of the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>453</sup> Elias Canetti, *The Secret Heart of The Clock*, op. cit., p. 140.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>454</sup> He writes: «The story of your youth must not turn into a catalogue of what became important in your later life. It must also contain the dissipation, the failure, and the waste. It's fraudulent to discover in one's youth only what one already knows. But can one say that every failed attempt had a meaning? Every person who still exists in my memory seems truly significant to me, every one. It torments me that I am dropping some without having talked about them. There are some things I can no longer find, others I turn away from. In how many different ways should one still try it?» Elias Canetti, *The Secret Heart of The Clock*, op. cit., p. 29.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>455</sup> «Canetti ignora l'arte del paesaggio e della topografia; non conosce altri spazi che quelli creati dalle relazioni tra gli esseri umani» Youssef Ishaghpour, op. cit., p. 160.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>456</sup> See: Robert Gould, «Die gerettete Zunge and Dichtung und Wahrheit: Hypertextuality in Autobiography and its implications», *Seminar: A Journal of Germanic Studies*, n. 21, pp. 79-107, p. 80.

<sup>457</sup> See: Penka Angelova, «Canettis autobiographische Trilogie als Bildungsroman», in Penka Angelova und Emilia Staitscheva (eds.), *Autobiographie zwischen Fiktion und Wirklichkeit*, Röhrig Universitätsverlag, St. Ingbert, 1997, pp. 47-62; Friederike Eigler, *Das autobiographische Werk von Elias Canetti. Verwandlung, Indetität, Machtausübung*, Stauffenburg, Tübingen 1988.

senses, among which listening plays a predominant role<sup>458</sup>. The acoustic perception dimension permeates the author's development, a path that Canetti relives by giving particular space to the figures who had an influence on him in his childhood and adolescence years<sup>459</sup>.

Canetti's aim is to recover, through his writing, the voices, the intonations of those who inhabited his past and contributed to his identity, and, as he writes, to develop: «A better way of listening: listen to the unexpected, no longer knowing what one is listening to»<sup>460</sup>. In fact, Canetti does not select his memories, but tries to leave memory as free as possible. As Ishaghpour remarks:

Canetti aims to leave memories as they present themselves, wishing to collect and restore them in and for themselves, as he has learned to do with everything else. His aim is not so much to formulate a philosophy of life or a theory of poetic formation as it is to conduct research on memory and time. Thus, we will not have a flow of memory but rather its discontinuity, which gives every memory, person, or event the possibility of appearing in its particular light — enabling us to avoid both excessive tension and weariness by constantly varying the object, level, and tone of the narrative, almost following the rhythm of breathing<sup>461</sup>

<sup>458</sup> See: Karoline Naab, op. cit.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>459</sup> See: Enza B. Licciardi, «Den neuen Götsen amsiedeln. Le figure tutoriali nell'autobiografia di Elias Canetti», *Studia Austriaca*, XIV, 2006, pp. 157-188.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>460</sup> Elias Canetti, *The Secret Heart of The Clock*, op. cit., p. 81.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>461</sup> «Canetti vuole lasciare il ricordo così come esso si offre, desidera raccoglierlo e restituirlo in sé e per sé, come ha imparato a fare con ogni cosa. Non si propone tanto di formulare una filosofia della vita o una teoria della formazione poetica, quanto di condurre delle ricerche sul ricordo e sul tempo. Non avremo

There is something ethical in the way Canetti understands his own autobiographical enterprise. One does not witness – stylistically – a divided or displaced self, but the simultaneous and complementary formation of an individuality that is formed and reformed in the space of the "renvoi" between lived time and narrated time:

The person no longer exists? But the word "I" is not abolished. Crystals are still forming around this word. What forms in this way branches out and blossoms. The plant-like nature of memory – its meaning and its mystery<sup>462</sup>

Memory, what Canetti calls «the sublime miracle of the human mind»<sup>463</sup> allows the subject to say I, and at the same time to develop the "plant-like nature of memory", i.e. to revive the dead, to bring them back to life through writing: «Keeping people alive through words, isn't that almost like creating them through words?»<sup>464</sup>.

In *Die gerettete Zunge*, it is indeed the words that, as in Sarraute's case, come to life and influence the protagonist. And, often, they trigger memories. Words are fundamental for the writer, who calls himself «a man

dunque il flusso della memoria ma la sua discontinuità, che conferisce a ogni ricordo, a ogni persona o evento, la possibilità di apparire nella sua luce particolare – cosa che permetterà di evitare, quasi assecondando il ritmo del respiro, sia la tensione troppo acuta sia la stanchezza, variando costantemente l'oggetto, il livello, il tono della narrazione» Youssef Ishaghpour, op. cit., p. 164.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>462</sup> «Die Person nicht mehr vorhanden? Aber das Wort "ich" ist nicht abgeschafft. Immer noch setzen sich Kristalle um dieses Wort an. Was sich auf diese Weise bildet, verzweigt sich und blüht. Das Pflanzenhafte der Erinnerung – ihr Sinn und ihr Geheimnis» Elias Canetti, *Aufzeichnungen 1954-1993*, Carl Hanser Verlag, München, 2004, pp. 405-406.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>463</sup> Elias Canetti, *The Secret Heart of The Clock*, op. cit., p. 127.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>464</sup> «Menschen durch Worte am Leben erhalten, ist das nicht beinahe schon so, wie sie durch Worte erschaffen?» Elias Canetti, *Die Provinz des Menschen*, op. cit.

made of parts of speech»<sup>465</sup> and states: «I don't believe there is anyone who knows what words are. I don't know, either, but I *sense* them, they are my substance»<sup>466</sup>. *Die gerettete Zunge*, as well as *Lessico famigliare* and *Enfance*, take the reader back to a time before words, to that childhood dimension that is perception and passivity, but, at the same time, passion:

The child is a body – a child's body, with all that is sensitive, vulnerable, and emotional – which receives images, sounds, and words. Like the khôra, it is the matricial place, the place of the greatest receptivity where everything passes. A conductive body, an imprint carrier, which allows traces to pass through. This body, however, is neither immobile nor inert: it is alive, capable of feeling and reacting, and of projecting signals of joy and pain. For where there is passivity, "passibility", there is also passion – suffering: the passive state leads the subject to suffer, to suffer, to experience violent sensations. The child, while undergoing the words thrown at her, lives passionately, attentively, with all her body and all her heart<sup>467</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>465</sup> Elias Canetti, *The Secret Heart of The Clock*, op. cit., p. 139

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>466</sup> Ibid., p. 71.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>467</sup> «L'enfant est un corps — corps enfant, avec tout ce qui est du sensible, du vulnérable et de l'affectif —, qui reçoit des images, des sons, des paroles. Telle la khôra, il est le lieu matriciel, lieu de la plus grande réceptivité où tout passe. Un corps conducteur, un porte-empreinte, qui laissent traverser les traces. Ce corps n'est cependant ni immobile ni inerte : il est vivant, capable de sentir et de réagir, et de projeter des signaux de joie et de douleur. Car là où il y a de la passivité, de la « passibilité », il y a aussi de la passion — de la souffrance : l'état passif porte le sujet à subir, à souffrir, à éprouver des sensations violentes. L'enfant, tout en subissant les paroles jetées sur elle, vit passionnément, attentivement, de tout son corps et de tout son cœur» Keiling Wei, op. cit., p. 104.

## 4.2. Earliest memory

Bruno Vercier's speech entitled *Le Mythe du premier souvenir*, revolves around the importance of the first memory within an autobiographical text. During the speech, Vercier states:

If one considers that autobiography is above all a return to the origin, we understand that the first memory plays a very special role in it and that it is, as such, affected by a mythical quality. Is it not the first manifestation of the faculty that allows the individual to find themselves? The individual, and the autobiographer more than any other, is memory. The first memory marks the true birth of the individual [...] The content of the first memory may well be futile, insignificant, but it will become sacred simply because it is the first memory<sup>468</sup>

Vercier affirms a number of things on which it is useful to reflect: if the autobiographical impulse is an attempt to rediscover, through writing, the path that led to the formation of one's identity (a concept which, as we have seen, comes into sharp crisis with the cultural and anthropological

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>468</sup> «Si l'on considère que l'autobiographie est avant tout une remontée vers l'origine, on comprend que le *premier* souvenir y joue un rôle tout particulier et qu'il est, en tant que tel, affecté d'une valeur mythique. N'est-il pas la première manifestation de la faculté qui permet à l'individu de se retrouver? L'individu, et l'autobiographe plus que tout autre, est mémoire. L'assimilation se fait très vite entre la faculté particulière et l'être tour entier, le premier souvenir marquant alors la véritable naissace de l'individu [...] Le contenu du premier souvenir peit bien être futile, insignifiant, il deviendra sacré du seul fait qu'il s'agit du premier souvenir» Bruno Vercier, *Le mythe du premier souvenir*, art. cit., p. 1030.

paradigm shift of psychanalysis)<sup>469</sup>, then the first memory represents the first real birth of the individual, that is, the birth of their self-consciousness: «biological birth (which must necessarily draw on external sources) is often replaced by the birth of memory (with which self-consciousness begins) particular importance is thus attached to the inaugural memory, the *Urszene*»<sup>470</sup>. If autobiography is considered as an investigation of origins, one can see how the first memory plays a special role in it, an is often imbued with a mythical aura.

Vercier's interpretation of the function of the first memory is not incorrect, but it does not consider the fact that autobiography is a mental and narrative construction *a posteriori*<sup>471</sup> and that therefore, the first memory – or the memory that is chosen as such – actually has primarily a strong

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>469</sup> On the influence of Freudian theory on the autobiographical narrative, see: Stefano Brugnolo, «Alcuni influssi freudiani sul tema letterario del ricordo infantile», *Il ricordo d'infanzia nelle letterature del Novecento*, op. cit.

<sup>470 «</sup>la nascita biologica (che deve necessariamente attingere a fonti esterne) viene spesso sostituita dalla nascita della memoria (con cui inizia la coscienza di sé) particolare importanza assume quindi il ricordo inaugurale, la *Urszene*» Sergio Zatti, *Morfologia del racconto d'infanzia*, in: Ibid., p. 31.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>471</sup> As Maria Anna Mariani comments on twentieth-century autobiography: «[...] la vita, in sé, non esiste. Un'autobiografia non racconta direttamente la vita passata di un individuo. Il passato è un oggetto perduto. Ma non completamente: esiste ciò che ne conserva le tracce e permette in qualche modo di ricostruirlo. [...] la memoria è una struttura vivente e interpretante [...]. Leggendo un'autobiografia ci si trova di fronte allora non alla vita passata di un individuo, ma a quel che della vita passata si è conservato nella sua memoria, in questa facoltà mutevole e viva. L'autobiografia è il racconto della memoria che un individuo ha della propria vita» [Life, in itself, does not exist. An autobiography does not directly recount an individual's past life. The past is a lost object. But not completely: what exists is that which preserves traces of it and somehow allows it to be reconstructed. [...] memory is a living, interpreting structure [...]. When reading an autobiography, one is then faced not with the past life of an individual, but with what of the past life has been preserved in their memory, in this changing and living faculty. Autobiography is the account of the memory an individual has of their lives.] Maria Anna Mariani, Sull'autobiografia contemporanea, op. cit., p. 9.

symbolic function: the first memory anticipates a destiny, often already containing some of its elements<sup>472</sup>. This aspect is remarked upon by Georges Gusdorf, who in the discussion following Vercier's speech states:

[The first memory] is not a memory; it is a kind of coincidence of the individual with his very being which is the deepest justification of the autobiographical process. It is not a question of memory; [...] it is a question of something that would be a "meta-memory", that is, a constitution of the individual according to the order of values. The autobiographical narrative is not simply a kind of deposition, it is a desperate attempt by the individual to recover the totality of their own life; one begins to search for it at the beginning, with the idea that there is a predestination. Now, this first memory is inaccessible; it is a memory that does not

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>472</sup> In his discussion, Zatti dwells on this aspect extensively: «Per quanto banale possa essere, diventerà sacro solo per il fatto di essere il primo [...]. Questo valore fondativo che il récit gli attribuisce è destinato a rinnovarsi in altri successivi eventi dell'esistenza che, caricandosi di un significato ugualmente simbolico, ne ripetono forme e linguaggio, come la conversione (nelle autobiografie religiose) o la vocazione (nelle autobiografie d'artista). A quel ricordo primo entrambe si ricollegano per il riaffiorare di un linguaggio dimenticato, per la rivelazione in cui si racchiude un destino, e non è un caso che il fenomeno si affidi di frequente a immagini di rinascita e di rigenerazione» [However ordinary it may be, it will only become sacred by the fact of being the first [...]. This founding value that the récit attributes to it is destined to be renewed in other successive events of one's existence which, charging themselves with an equally symbolic meaning, repeat its forms and language, such as conversion (in religious autobiographies) or vocation (in artists' autobiographies). Both are reconnected to that first memory by the resurfacing of a forgotten language, by the revelation in which a destiny is enclosed, and it is no coincidence that the phenomenon frequently relies on images of rebirth and regeneration] Sergio Zatti, art. cit., p. 35.

have a temporal value, a spatial value, a historical value; it is a memory that has a meta-memory, metaphysical value<sup>473</sup>

Gusdorf's discourse on métamémoire raises two fundamental questions: the first is that of the reliability of memory and the second is that of pre-linguistic memory. The two issues, as we shall see, are closely linked, but it will be useful to address them separately.

Regarding the first question, the authenticity of the recollection comes into crisis, since, as for post-Freudian thought, there are no true memories, but only "screen memories" However, "Freud never resigns

<sup>473 «[</sup>le premier souvenir] Ce n'est pas un souvenir; c'est une espèce de coïncidence de l'homme avec lui-même qui est la justification profonde de la démarche autobiographique. Il ne s'agit pas de la mémoire; [...] il s'agit de quelque chose qui serait une « métamémoire », c'est-à-dire une constitution de l'individu selon l'ordre des valeurs. Le récit autobiographique n'est pas simplement une sorte de déposition, c'est un essai désespéré pour l'individu de récupérer la totalité de sa propre vie; on commence à la chercher au commencement, avec l'idée qu'il y a une prédestination. Or, ce premier souvenir est inaccessible; ou bien c'est un souvenir qui n'a pas une valeur temporelle, une valeur spatiale, une valeur historique; c'est un souvenir qui a une valeur de métamémoire, de métaphysique» Georges Gusdorf, Discussion following Bruno Vercier, art. cit., p. 66.

<sup>474</sup> This is one of the problems that most troubles the autobiographical genre, namely memory's paradoxical relationship with the past: it claims to preserve it and meanwhile does nothing but deform it. This and other problematic aspects of memory are addressed by Paul Ricœur in: «Memory, Forgetfulness and History», *Iyyun: The Jerusalem Philosophical Quarterly*, n. 45, 1996, pp. 13-24. On the "screen memories" introduced by Freud, however, Brugnolo provides a clear and comprehensive definition: «L'espressione ricordo di copertura in effetti allude in primis a un ricordo vero, reale, in linea di principio recuperabile. Di fatto però sempre più Freud ha mostrato che ci sono tantissime, tendenzialmente infinite riedizioni rivedute, corrette, aumentate di alcuni pochi ricordi fondamentali. È come se dentro qualsiasi ricordo ne vibrassero altri e alla fine tutti convergessero verso un unico grande ricordo che però non è un fatto, un avvenimento, ma una sorta di Ur-copione, una sceneggiatura originaria che prevede tante possibili version, tanti ricordi di ricordi» [The expression "screen memory" refers to a true, real, and in theory recoverable memory. However, Freud gradually demonstrated

his confident attitude: truth always emerges *in those deformed, transfigured, and falsified memories*»<sup>475</sup>. However much the memories are distorted by the manipulation of memory, the past, in the twentieth century, is a past that does not pass, because «it is never really lost, [...] it is always with us, it is something we always must deal with»<sup>476</sup> (Let us recall the dimension of Lyotard's childhood as explained in the previous chapter).

When it comes to the second issue, i. e., prelinguistic memory, the earliest childhood memories retain their sensory vividness until late in life<sup>477</sup>. Because such childhood scenes are based primarily on visual and/or auditory sensations and are only later translated into language, they are even more interesting for the present analysis.

In this regard, Brugnolo proposes an analysis of the *Urszene* of Kafka's *Letter to my Father*<sup>478</sup>. Through the analysis of Kafka's first

that there are many, potentially infinite revised, corrected, and augmented reeditions of a few fundamental memories. It's as if other memories vibrate within each memory, and eventually they all converge on a single great memory that isn't a fact, an event, but a kind of Ur-script, an original script with many possible versions, many memories of memories...] Stefano Brugnolo, «Alcuni influssi freudiani sul tema letterario del ricordo infantile», In: Id., op. cit., p. 363.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>475</sup> «Freud non dimette mai la sua attitudine fiduciosa: *in quei ricordi deformati, trasfigurati e falsati affiora sempre la verità*» Ibid., p. 371.

<sup>476 «</sup>non è mai veramente perduto, [...] è sempre con noi, con cui ci tocca sempre fare i conti» Ibid., p. 371.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>477</sup> See Freud quoted in Brugnolo, art. cit., p. 371.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>478</sup> «There is just a single incident I can remember from these early years, but perhaps you remember it ss well. Once I whimpered long in the night for water: not from thirst, but probably in part to anger you, and in part to entertain myself. After threats had failed to help, you took me out of my bed, carried me to the courtyard balcony and left me there alone in my shirt for a little while outside the closed door. I won't say that you were wrong; perhaps that was the only way to get some peace in the night but I will say that it characterised your education methods and their effects on me. I was from then on probably obedient, but I had an inner scar. Due to my nature it was impossible to link these things in the right way: the senseless asking for water – which to me seemed normal – and being carried

memory, Brugnolo observes how – in many twentieth century autobiographies – the first memory is chosen not so much for its anteriority as for its memorability. A memory's iconicity, is frequently determined by its being a "traumatic" memory, which leaves a trace and shapes the subject's future identity:

What is staged through relived memory is not a fact, but rather an almost abstract structure that can be summarised as follows: The subject's behaviour is sanctioned by a supreme authority (die letzte Instanz) by referring to incomprehensible parameters, making him feel like nothing. But that structure can only be established and sustained if it is manifested, almost ecstatically crystallised in a scene, in an indelible image, almost an ideogram that imprints the subject. Indeed, the memory thus understood operates precisely crystallisation according to Stendhal's mechanisms: crystallising, indelibly fixing around that memory a series of previously mobile and uncertain psychic lines of force. So that episode certainly happened (it is not fiction) but what matters again is that the subject, perhaps after some time, has become attached to it, choosing it as a memory-guide, as a personal myth [...]. A childhood memory, in this sense, is also an image capable of indicating meaning, unity, and coherence in a person's life. Without, of course, completely exhausting and saturating that potential sense. This memory, in fact, tells us not only of a trauma that permanently

outside – which filled me with terror. And for years I was tormented by the thought that this giant man, my father, could almost without reason come to me in the night, and lift me out of bed, and leave me on the balcony: he was my final court of appeal, and for him I was such a nothing» Franz Kafka (1919), *Letter to my Father*, Lulu, Morrisville, 2008, p. 8.

damaged the individual, that "reduced them to obedience," but it also takes the form of a radical question, an endless questioning of the adult and normal world that, beginning with that scene, appears cracked, disconnected, lacking rationality and legitimacy<sup>479</sup>

Two elements stand out from Brugnolo's analysis: the first is crystallisation, the second is perspective. Brugnolo does not doubt the authenticity of Kafka's first memory but emphasises that it is the activity of memory<sup>480</sup> that crystallises the decisive, "traumatic" points that define the memory's iconicity.

<sup>479 «</sup>ciò che viene messo in scena attraverso il ricordo rivissuto non è un fatto ma quasi una struttura astratta, riassumibile in questi termini: una autorità suprema (die letzte Instanz) sanziona il comportamento del soggetto richiamandosi a parametri incomprensibili e ottenendo così di farlo sentire un niente. Ma la fissazione di quella struttura può aver luogo e reggersi solo se si palesa, si cristallizza quasi estaticamente in una scena, in una immagine indelebile, quasi un ideogramma che imprinta il soggetto. E in effetti, il ricordo così inteso funziona proprio secondo i meccanismi della cristallizzazione stendhaliana: a cristallizzarsi, a fissarsi indelebilmente intorno a quel ricordo sono una serie di linee-forza psichiche fino a quel momento ancora mobili e incerte. Quell'episodio è dunque certo accaduto (non è una finzione) ma ciò che conta ancora una volta è che il soggetto, magari a distanza di tempo, vi si sia fissato, lo abbia scelto a ricordoguida, a mito personale [...]. In questo senso un ricordo d'infanzia è anche una immagine capace di indicare un senso, una unità e una coerenza alla vita di una persona. Senza naturalmente esaurire, saturare quel senso potenziale una volta per tutte. [...] Questo ricordo, infatti, non ci racconta tanto e soltanto di un trauma che ha danneggiato per sempre l'individuo, che lo ha "ridotto all'obbedienza", esso si configura anche come una domanda radicale, una messa in questione infinita del mondo adulto e normale che, a partire da quella scena, apparirà incrinato, sconnesso, carente di razionalità e legittimità» Brugnolo, art. cit., pp. 366-367.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>480</sup> Mariani offers an intriguing reflection on this process. The process of remembrance, according to the scholar, can be defined as "memoria-racconto", a compound word that coordinates and distinguishes. In "memoria-racconto", two main ideas intersect: «la memoria è, al tempo stesso, l'oggetto di un racconto e la funzione vivente che costruisce il racconto autobiografico – un racconto che

The second point on which Brugnolo focuses is that, returning to an era in which the subject moves through the world primarily through their senses, the perspective of the first memories will frequently be narrated through what Francesco Orlando defines a «sguardo dal basso»<sup>481</sup>, i.e., the perspective proper to childhood that the child turns to physical and moral entities they consider higher than themselves.

The memories that Canetti, Ginzburg and Sarraute choose as their original scenes and decide to place first among their childhood memories exhibit some of the characteristics listed below: all three deal with a "traumatic" event in different ways, and all three are linked to the dimension of language.

In this regard, a note by Elias Canetti from 1970 resonates with all the concepts I have addressed so far. The author writes: «[autobiography] begins with birth, which does not depend on one at all. Since we know

pretende di essere veramente accaduto e che tuttavia è strutturalmente inaffidabile» [memory is both the object of a tale and the living function that constructs the autobiographical tale — a tale that claims to have really happened and yet is structurally unreliable]. According to the scholar, between the time lived and the time narrated lies the time recounted by memory. The autobiographical process, according to this scheme, functions according to a range of mimetic levels: «1. Mimesi I (consapevolezza del carattere temporale della vita umana); 2. Memoriaracconto (configurazione naturale del tempo vissuto, operata dalla memoria); 3. Mimesi II (configurazione narrativa del tempo); 4. Mimesi III (arricchimento della propria comprensione del tempo, avvenuto durante la lettura)» [1. Mimesis I (the awareness of the temporal character of human life); 2. Memoria-racconto (the natural configuration of experienced time, as carried out by memory) 3. Mimesis II (narrative configuration of time); 4. Mimesis III (enrichment of one's understanding of time, which occurs through reading)] Maria Anna Mariani, *Sull'autobiografia contemporanea*, op. cit., pp. 10-11.

<sup>481</sup> See: Francesco Orlando (1966), *Infanzia, memoria e storia da Rousseau ai Romantici*, Pacini, Pisa, 2007.

nothing about our births, we can begin only at a point that we do know something about, and that point has long been the same»<sup>482</sup>.

Die gerettete Zunge begins with a chapter entitled "My Earliest Memory"<sup>483</sup>. The protagonist here is the tongue, with the ambiguity that combines in this term the symbolic order of the word and the piece of flesh<sup>484</sup>. If at the centre of the first volume of the autobiography is language<sup>485</sup>, as the word and the writing that are essential to the poet's life, what is "set free", in this first memory, is precisely the piece of flesh:

My earliest memory is dipped in red. I come out of a door on the arm of a maid, the floor in front of me is red, and to the left a staircase goes down, equally red. Across from us, at the same height, a door opens, and a smiling man steps forth, walking towards me in a friendly way. He steps right up close to me, halts, and says: "Show me your tongue." I stick out my tongue, he reaches into his pocket, pulls out a jackknife, opens it, and brings the blade all the way to my

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>482</sup> Elias Canetti, *Notes from Hampstead*, op. cit., p. 181.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>483</sup> Elias Canetti, *The Tongue Set Free*, op. cit., p. 5.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>484</sup> In Canetti's first memory, the real protagonist is the child's tongue, but the tongue stands symbolically for language, which as the author later claims is a means through which he can evade even the power of death. The author further develops this argument in *Crowds and Power*. For an in-depht analysis of the meaning and variations of "Zunge" and "Sprache", see: Nikolina Skenderija-Bohnet, «Wozu Gerettet? Die Zungenvariationen bei Elias Canetti», *Oxford German Studies*, vol. 50, 2021, pp. 3-16.

<sup>485</sup> On this aspect see: Sigurd Paul Scheichl, *Hörenlernen. Zur teleologischen Struktur der autobiographischen Bücher Canettis*, art. cit., pp. 73-79. This argument is supported by Jeremy Adler's afterword to Elias Canetti's collection of notes from his time in England. The editor found the predominance of the sense of smell and, therefore, of the nose, as well as of actual touch, given the many references to English parties where there is a lack of contact between guests. See: Jeremy Adler, *Nachwort*, in: Elias Canetti, *Party im Blitz. Die englischen Jahre*, Carl Hanser Verlag, München, 2003, pp. 211-228.

tongue. He says: "Now we'll cut off his tongue." I don't dare pull back my tongue, he comes closer and closer, the blade will touch me any second. In the last moment, he pulls back the knife, saying: "Not today, tomorrow." He snaps the knife shut again and puts it back in his pocket. Every morning, we step out of the door and into the red hallway, the door opens, and the smiling man appears. I know what he's going to say and I wait for the command to show my tongue. I know he's going to cut it off, and I get more and more scared each time. That's how the day starts, and it happens very often<sup>486</sup>

Die gerettete Zunge opens with the tongue-threatening incident that gives the volume its title. The earliest memory Canetti offers his reader is older than any recollection of his family, his home, his hometown: it is located in another mental space; it is the birth of his (self) consciousness. The space is coloured red, saturated with anguish. It is a memory of fear and silence. In a rough, cryptic way, this memory is almost an epigraph, a kind of emblem, an initial image that governs the work as a whole. As if a threat of mutilation and imminent loss were hanging over language, the acquisition and preservation of which were central to Canetti's existence<sup>487</sup>.

While there is no way of disputing that this was his earliest memory, the fact that the tongue and the capacity for language come to dominate the first volume suggests that the text is constructed around the principle of symbolic selection rather than historical truth<sup>488</sup>. Some critics have

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>486</sup> Elias Canetti, *The Tongue set Free*, op. cit., p. 5.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>487</sup> This is one of the aspects covered by Karen Haddad-Wotling in: id., *L'enfant qui a failli se taire: essai sur l'écriture autobiographique*, Champion, Paris, 2004.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>488</sup> When analysed alongside the final pages of the trilogy, the earliest memory presented by Canetti and the thematisation of a "symbolic castration", according to Ishaghpour, are to be interpreted as a narrative device that organises

interpreted the incident in the light of Freud's theory of infant castration anxiety. This is particularly evident in Helen O' Sullivan's reading of Canetti's trilogy: drawing on Lacan's concepts of Real, Imaginary, and Sybolic, O'Sullivan depicts their influence in Canetti's autobiography as well as their relationship to language. The scholar begins her analysis by explaining the concept of "maturity" in the Kantian sense, i.e., what Kant calls "Mündigkeit", that is the acquisition of linguistic competence: «commonly translated as "maturity", may also be linked, as in Kant's essay, with the idea of developing an independent voice which expresses a critical reasoning of its own, rather than following the reasoning of another»<sup>489</sup>.

According to O'Sullivan, Canetti's first memory thematises not only a symbolic castration, but also the author's increasingly troubled relationship to the symbolic, e.g. the Oedipal complex. O' Sullivan believes that, although Oedipal themes run through Canetti's text, it is in the very first few paragraphs that one sees the clearest links between language as representative of the symbolic order and the fear of castration:

Here begins what appears an increasingly troubled relationship to the symbolic, which is exacerbated by the

the trilogy's account in a circular narrative space: «L'apprendimento della lingua, della lettura e del compimento della scrittura, nei due primi volumi dell'autobiografia di Elias Canetti, si svolgono nello spazio istituito, per così dire, tra due immagini di mutilazione. Da un lato il ricordo primitivo della minaccia del coltello sulla lingua, dall'altro l'immagine violenta del l'occhio che viene strappato – la lingua e gli occhi, essenziali per chi si è votato ai libri, quelli che si leggono e quelli che si scrivono» [In the first two volumes of Elias Canetti's autobiography, the learning of language, reading, and the task of writing take place in the space established, as it were, between two images of mutilation. The primordial memory of the knife threat on the tongue, on the other hand, the violent image of the eye being torn out – the tongue and the eyes, essential for those who have devoted themselves to books, both read and written] Youssef Ishaghpour, op. cit., p. 183.

<sup>489</sup> Helen O' Sullivan, «Father Tongue and Mother Tongue – Elias Canetti», *Journal of Postgraduate Research*, n. 5, 2006, pp. 130-143, p. 130.

death of his father. From this point on, Elias's relationship to his mother develops something of the pre-Oedipal/pre-linguistic closeness once lost by entry into language<sup>490</sup>

While sharing O'Sullivan's overall interpretation, i.e., the link between the real/semiotic and the symbolic regarding Canetti's relationship with parental figures, it seems much more significant here that – in his first memory – it is Canetti's communication capabilities, rather than his sexuality, which is threatened<sup>491</sup>. The mysterious significance of the first memory is clarified immediately afterwards by the author, who writes:

I kept it to myself and asked my mother about it only much later. She could tell by the ubiquitous red that it was the guesthouse in Carlsbad, where she had spent the summer of 1907 with my father and me. To take care of the two-year-old baby, she had brought along a nanny from Bulgaria, a girl who wasn't even fifteen. Every morning at the crack of dawn, the girl went out holding the child on her arm; she spoke only Bulgarian, but gota long fine in the lively town, and was always back punctually with the child. Once, she was seen on the street with an unknown young man, she couldn't say

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>490</sup> Ibid., p. 133.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>491</sup> O' Sullivan's interpretation is similar Waltraud Wiethölter's one as explained in: «Sprechen – Lesen – Schreiben: Zur Funktion von Sprache und Schrifts in Canettis», *Deutsche Vierteljahrsschift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte*, n. 64, vol. 1, pp. 149-171, 1990. On the contrary, according to Stefanie Wieprecht-Roth's interpretation, the function of the knife in "My First Memory", when analysed in parallel to Jewish circumcision, can be interpreted as an instrument that creates the symbol of unity (with God), but which can also break this bond by cutting off tongue, and thus language, see: Stefanie Wieprecht-Roth, "*Die Freiheit in der Zeit ist die Uberwindung des Todes.*" *Uberleben in der Welt und im unsterblichen Werk: Eine Annahrung an Elias Canetti*, Konigshausen & Neumann, Wurzburg, 2004.

anything about him, a chance acquaintance. A few weeks later, it turned out that the young man lived in the room right across from us, on the other side of the corridor. At night, the girl sometimes went to his room quickly. My parents felt responsible for her and sent her back to Bulgaria immediately. Both of them, the maid and the young man, had always left the house very early in the morning, that's how they must have met, that's the way it must have started. The threat with the knife worked, the child quite literally held his tongue for ten years<sup>492</sup>

The second part of the memory consist of Canetti's mother's version of the incident. The knife threat is finally explained: the incident occurred in Karlsbad, between a young Bulgarian woman who had to care for little Elias when he was two years old, and a neighbour from the same landing whom she occasionally visited at night. The morning threat was intended to keep the child from revealing this secret knowledge.

Particularly interesting is the final sentence: the young Canetti remains silent for ten years, during which time the incident gains its special significance and becomes the writer's foundational myth. Two aspects are particularly fascinating. First, the scene could well be compared to the example of "traumatic memory" that Brugnolo analysed using the example of Kafka's *Letters to his Father*: adult language is thematised, in Canetti's first memory, as threatening and violent, and leaves the child powerless and *hilflos*. The sensation being depicted can be described through what Sarraute calls "tropism", i.e., a feeling so deep and latent that it cannot be described linguistically. Thus, the episode enduringly associates language with power

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>492</sup> Elias Canetti, *The Tongue set Free*, op. cit., pp. 5-6.

and the memory of Canetti's vulnerability grants the incident emblematic status in the rest of the narrative.

On the other hand, Canetti's first memory perfectly thematises the concept of *infans* that we depicted in the previous chapter. Canetti's thematization of 'childhood' is a pre-linguistic moment and positions the author in the metamorphosis that most characterises him in the autobiographical trilogy, that of "earwitness".

The first memory, in its complexity, drives us not only to an interpretation of its content, but also to some stylistic considerations concerning focalisation and narrative tenses. It should be noted that, although the scene is imbued with a profound and unrepeatable meaning, the verbal tenses – above all the use of present – and the time adverbs signal to us that it is, in fact, an iterative scene (e.g., *Jeden Morgen treten wir* aus der Tür heraus auf den roten Flur, die Türe öffnet sich und der lächelnde Mann *erscheint*). Canetti's experience of the threat of losing his tongue gains validity as a continual present moment, as pointed out by Oliver Sill in his reading of the opening passage: «Es erlangt den Status zeitloser Gegenwärtigkeit»<sup>493</sup>.

Both from a content and a narratological point of view, what we have just observed in *Die gerettete Zunge* connects well with Nathalie Sarraute's first memory in *Enfance*.

<sup>493</sup> [It attains the status of timeless present] Oliver Sill, Zerbrochene Spiegel. Studien zur Theorie und Praxis modernen autobiographischen Erzählens,

de Gruyter, Berlin, 1991, p. 180.

According to Philippe Lejeune, Sarraute's first two memories have a special importance<sup>494</sup>, outlining the two main thematic axes around which Sarraute's narrative revolves:

Two undated scenes take place during stays in Switzerland with the father in the very early childhood. Their antiquity justifies their initial position, but the real reason is different: they are two emblematic scenes. They pose the problem of the relationship with parents [...]. At the same time, they symbolise two aspects of the relationship to writing: violent intrusion and obstinate rumination [...]. The two scenes thus form a complex knot articulating, in a problematic way, the family novel and writing practices<sup>495</sup>

*Enfance*'s famous *incipit* presents two voices in conversation: the first narrative entity wishes to write about its childhood, while the other, whose identity is unknown, is a critical and inquisitive voice:

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>494</sup> Philippe Lejeune, who studied *Enfance* from Nathalie Sarraute's manuscript, observes that the fragments were written in the exact order that they are presented to the reader. Analyzing the first pages of the text thus means entering the writer's mind at the beginning of her autobiographical project: «Nous sommes au début du livre, d'un livre qui a été écrit chapitre par chapitre, donc au début du travail d'invention de cette forme si nouvelle» [We are at the beginning of the book, of a book that has been written chapter by chapter, so at the beginning of the invention of this very new form] Philippe Lejeune, *Les brouillon de soi*, Seuil, Paris, 1998, p. 279.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>495</sup> «[...] deux scènes non datées, mais qui se situent lors de séjours en Suisse avec le père, dans la toute première enfance. Leur ancienneté justifie leur position initiale, mais la vraie raison est autre : ce sont deux scènes emblématiques. Elles posent le problème du rapport aux parents [...]. En même temps, elles symbolisent deux aspects du rapport à l'écriture : l'effraction violente et la rumination obstinée [...] Les deux scènes forment donc un nœud complexe articulant, de manière problématique, le roman familial et les pratiques d'écriture » Philippe Lejeune, *Les brouillons de soi*, op. cit., p. 258.

- Then you really are going to do that? "Evoke your childhood memories"... How these words embarass you, you don't like them. But you have to admit that they are the only appropriate words. You want to "evoke your memories"... there's no getting away from it, that's what it is.
- Yes, I can't help it, it tempts me, I don't know why...
- It could be... mightn't it be... we sometimes don't realize... it could be that your forces are declining...
  - No, I don't think so... at least I don't feel they are...
- And yet what do you want to do... "to evoke your memories" ... mightn't that be...
  - Oh, for haven's sake...<sup>496</sup>

In contrast to what we saw in Canetti's first memory, in this case we are dealing with an entirely new experience: the reader plunges, in *medias res*, into listening to a dialogue. Who is speaking is not yet clear. One voice, the one that wants to evoke its memories, one is tempted to instinctively attribute it to the author named on the cover: Nathalie Sarraute. The other voice, meanwhile, has repeatedly been said to belong to an interlocutor who knows the author well, so well that it sounds like the author herself doubled in another consciousness and another voice. In short, it would be the writer's double, so that the counterpoint between the two voices would be an externalised inner dialogue, a dramatised articulation of the

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>496</sup> Nathalie Sarraute (1983), *Childhood*, John Calder, London, 1984, pp. 1-

autobiographical metanarrative process. This is at least the dialogical attribution uniformly shared by numerous critical interpretations<sup>497</sup>.

The repeated phrase "evoke your childhood memories" exposes an aesthetic project that implies a narcissistic and stereotypical temptation by mocking it. As with Canetti, we see a narrative temporal construction based on the present in Sarraute's first memory. However, unlike Canetti, who used the present tense to introduce the "sguardo dal basso"<sup>498</sup>, Sarraute uses a verbal tense that apparently refers to the moment of writing.

Sarraute's reader is thrown into a dialogical present that immediately calls into question the possibility of recalling the past. Sarraute's childhood narrative, in self-critical form, thus calls into question memory and the reconstruction of experience through writing. The conversation that guides the recollection of memories is at the very core of *Enfance*'s autobiographical discourse: it is the relationship with the Other, the process of hearing its voice, that pushes the "I" to evoke childhood memories.

Starting with the *incipit*, Sarraute's autobiographical strategy diverges from traditional *récit de soi*, as Lejeune notes: «this is because *Enfance* is a work of compromise, or rather, of fusion and synthesis between the classical autobiographical act and a new psychological realism based

233

<sup>497</sup> See in particular the following interpretations: Gaëtan Brulotte, «Tropismes et sous-conversation», *L'Arc*, 1984, 95, pp. 39-54; Jean Pierrot, *Nathalie Sarraute*, José Corti, Paris 1990; Françoise Asso, *Nathalie Sarraute*. *Une écriture de l'effraction*, PUF, Paris 1996; Monique Gosselin, Enfance de Nathalie Sarraute, Gallimard, Paris 1996; Philippe Lejeune, *Paroles d'enfance*, in Id., *Les brouillons de soi*, op. cit., pp. 34-53; Ann Jefferson, op. cirt., 2000; Anna Bucarelli, «La "dechiru- re de soi(e)": *Enfance* de Nathalie Sarraute, in "Publif@rum", 2006, [online]. Only avoids the identification of the double, as he does not lean towards any unambiguous attribution and leaves the voices free to move in the indistinct dialogical space, see: Jean-Yves Tadié, *Introduction. Musicienne de nos silences*, in Nathalie Sarraute, Œuvres complètes, Gallimard, Paris, 1996, p. XXV.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>498</sup> See: Francesco Orlando, op. cit.

essentially on the work of the voice (orality and sub-conversation)»<sup>499</sup>. According to Edit Bors, the strongly oral dialogical register is a «present actuel» that allows the identification of an «espace enonciatif transparent» based on the triad «je-ici-mainenat»<sup>500</sup> and that develops in the course of the text through the marked use of verbs referring to the memorial sphere («je revois», «je m'efforce de reconstituer», «je parviens à retrouver», «je ne retrouve pas», «je ne sais plus») often accompanied by deictic temporal adverbs such as «à present» or «maintenant» that emphasise the function of dialogue as a time of writing and recollection. This narrative contrivance is clearly just an appeal to discursive instantaneity, a stylisation effect that almost touches the boundaries of fiction<sup>501</sup>. In this sense we are witnessing the *mise en forme* of what Jean-Luc Nancy had theorised as the "movement" of the diapason-subject, namely: «the arch-music of that resonance where it *listens to itself* [s'écoute], by listening to itself *finds itself* [se trouve], and by finding itself *deviates* [s'ecarte] from itself in order to resound further

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>499</sup> «C'est qu'*Enfance* est une œuvre de compromis, ou, disons plutôt, de fusion et de synthèse entre l'acte autobiographique classique et un nouveau réalisme psychologique fondé essentiellement sur le travail de la voix (oralité et sous-conversation)» Philippe Lejeune «Nouveau roman et retour à l'autobiographie», in: Michel Contant (ed.), *L'auteur et le manuscrit*, PUF, Paris, 1991, p. 64.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>500</sup> Edit Bors, art.cit., p. 312.

Italian prose, it is not uncommon to find situations relating to «al piano temporale (per la verità, del tutto fittizio) corrispondente all'attività della scrittura. Si tratterà, in tal caso, di un Presente di "metalessi", per usare l'espressione con cui Genette [1972] designa l'artificio dello scrittore che mette in scena sé stesso nella propria (ribadisco, fittizia) situazione esistenziale» [situations relating to the (admittedly, entirely fictitious) temporal plane corresponding to the activity of writing. It will be, in this case, a metalepsis-present, to use the expression with which Genette [1972] designates the artifice of the writer who stages him/herself in his/her own (I repeat, fictitious) existential situation] Pier Marco Bertinetto, *Tempi verbali e narrativa italiana dell'Otto/Novecento. Quattro esercizi di stilistica della lingua*, Alessandria, L'Orso, 2003, p. 60.

away, listening to itself before hearing/understanding itself, and thus actually becoming its "subject," which is neither the same as nor other than the individual subject who writes the text»<sup>502</sup>. The present tense of the dialogue in Sarraute thus has a symbolic and non-temporal relevance, it is an instrument of destabilisation of the narrative that emphasises the importance of recollection as an experience of the present.

Although the present-tense simulates the realism of reminiscence in the dialogical sequence, Sarraute's childhood episodes typically gravitate towards a different type of narration, marked by a more immediate "I-therenow" structure, in which the narrator relives past experiences as if for the first time. This dynamic already occurs in the first memory, in which the "conversation" dimension very soon fades into "sous-conversation", i.e., a more one-sided present tense discourse, in which the narrator produces a kind of inner monologue attributable to her past self, the child Natacha:

Nein, das tust du nicht... "No, you're not to do that"... here they are again, these words, they have come to life again, just as living, just as potent as they were at that moment, such a long time ago, when they penetrated me, they press, they bear down with all their strenght, with all their enormous weight... and under their pressure, something within me that is just as strong, that is even stronger, emerges, swells, rises up... the words that come out of my mouth carry it, hammer it in... Doch, ich werde es tun. "Yes, I am going to do it." 503

We are here again dealing with a traumatic memory, an imposition from a higher power. The first dialogical section, with one voice intimating

<sup>502</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, *Listening*, op. cit. p. 35.

235

<sup>503</sup> Nathalie Sarraute, *Childhood*, op. cit., pp. 2-3.

to the other not to recall childhood memories, recalls an ancient memory, deeply rooted in the subject, through memorial and traumatic assonance.

Monique Gosselin, who, like Lejeune, has studied the manuscript of *Enfance*, questions the importance of the first two scenes in the overall organisation of the text, recognising the theme of transgression – both childish transgression and authorial transgression – as a common thread linking the first two paragraphs: «between the first and second chapters, the chaining takes place by association of contiguity. Certainly, another sequence could be deciphered between the first and second chapters, a chaining based on the trasgression»<sup>504</sup>.

Only a few lines later do we learn that Natacha is staying in Switzerland with a girl who looks after her and must teach her German. The child wishes to take the scissors from the girl and destroy the sofa she is sitting on. This is Sarraute's first childhood memory, a memory with strong metatextual value that thematises the violence and transgression of the act of creation. It is an emotional memory tinged with a violent feeling. As with Canetti, the recollection is triggered by a phrase, a commandment. The remembered words are in a foreign language, which lends the sentence a solemn and

association de contiguïté. Certes, un autre enchaînement pourrait être déchiffré entre le premier et le seconde chapitre, fondé sur la trasgression» Monique Gosselin, *Enfance de Nathalie Sarraute*, Gallimard, Paris, 1996, p. 54. This view is shared by Anna Bucarelli, who points out «il passo citato si offre, dunque, come mise en abyme del gesto doppiamente trasgressivo compiuto dalla scrittrice nell'affrontare il vissuto autobiografico senza abbandonare la dimensione in cui si colloca l'intera sua opera ma anzi fornendone un'immagine originaria e fondatrice» [the aforementioned passage thus offers itself as a mise en abyme of the doubly transgressive gesture made by the writer in dealing with autobiographical experience without abandoning the dimension in which her entire work is set, but rather providing an original and founding image of it] Anna Bucarelli, «La déchurure de soi(e): Enfance di Nathalie Sarraute», *Publifarum*, 2006 [online].

unrepeatable singularity while conveying the prohibition<sup>505</sup>. It is not only the words heard, but the memory of their acoustic violence that makes them a foundational and traumatic memory:

[...] *Ich werde es zerreissen*... "i'm going to slash it"... the word *zerreissen* has a hissing, ferocoius sound, in one second something is going to happen... I'm going to slash, devastate, destroy... it will be an outrage... a criminal attack... [...] But she raises her head, she looks me in the eyes and says, strongly stressing each syllable: *Nein, das tust du nicht*... "No, you're not to do that"... exercising a gentle, firm, insistent, inexorable pressure, the same pressure I later perceived in the words, the tone, of hypnotists, of animal tamers...

"No, you're not to do that"... these words flow in a heavy, massive tide, what it carries with it sinks into me in order to crush what is stirring in me, what is trying to rise... and under this pressure, it braces itself, rises more vigorously,

phrase en langue étrangère chez Nathalie Sarraute, in Yannick Cheval and Philippe Wahl (eds.), Nathalie Sarraute. Du tropisme à la phrase, Presses Universitaires de Lyon, Lyon 2003, pp. 209-21. See also Ginevra Bompiani's afterward to the Italian version of the text: «Nella parola "non farai" è nascosta una doppia insidia: non solo la tendenza (ben nota alle fiabe) di ogni premonizione a trasformarsi in una trasgressione, ma il suo appartenere a una lingua straniera. La lingua dell'infanzia, la lingua da cui l'infante impara a difendersi, è sempre una lingua straniera» [Hidden in the word "you're not to do that" is a double pitfall: not only the tendency (well known from fairy tales) of every premonition to turn into a transgression, but its belonging to a foreign language. The language of childhood, the language from which the infant learns to defend itself, is always a foreign language] Ginevra Bompiani, L'infanzia della parola, in Nathalie Sarraute, Infanzia, Cronopio, Napoli, 2005, p. 228.

rises higher, grows, and violently projects out of me the words... "Yes, I'm going to do it."

"No, you're not to do that"... these words surround me, constrain me, shackle me, I struggle... "Yes, I'm going to do it"... There now, I'm freeing myself, excitement and exaltation impel my arm, I plunge the point of the scissors in with all my strength, the silk gives, tears, I slash the back of the settee from top to bottom, and I look at what comes out of it... something flabby, greyish, is escaping from the slit... 506

Returning to the structure of the text, as we have mentioned, there is a principle of discontinuity and incoherence that prevails between the pages of *Enfance*. There is no apparent order among the memories collected by Sarraute, but as Lejeune has noted, the memories often spring from words heard during childhood:

These two voices, whose written text mimics speech, often speak themselves about words, sometimes spoken but more often heard by the child and engraved in their memory. In turn, they mimic these words and explore their subconversation through free indirect discourse. They enter into the thoughts and speech of the child, who herself perceives more or less clearly the implicit discourse of adults. This general "oralisation" allows for a very flexible back and forth between the present and the past, between analysis and mimicry<sup>507</sup>

506 Nathalie Sarraute, *Childhood*, op. cit., pp. 4-5.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>507</sup> «Ces deux voix, dont le texte écrit mime la parole, parlent elles-mêmes très souvent de paroles, prononcées parfois, mais en général plutôt entendues par l'enfant et gravées dans sa mémoire. A leur tour, elles miment ces paroles, en

Memories emerge from the formless amalgam of past memory for Sarraute, as they do for Ginzburg and Canetti, from words heard during childhood. The only difference is that for Sarraute those words are not the building blocks of a family, but instead they are often painful words. As Vercier notes, every memory is nothing but «the reconstruction, around one of these words, of a moment, a mood, a situation: why was it spoken, who was trying to hurt whom, and how »<sup>508</sup>. These words derive their power from their sound, their arrangement in the sentence or the intonation with which they are pronounced. For Sarraute and for her child-self not only the word is crucial, but also its intonation, its musicality, its rhythm and its pronunciation, elements which attached it to, or detached it even more powerfully from, its signified. That's why every memory is built around the exploration of how certain words were heard by the child, how a word or phrase became embedded within them.

In opposition to Canetti, who, as we have seen, reacts to the symbolic event of linguistic castration by being silent for ten years, thereby initiating the period of life he refers to as "the school of hearing," we witness a different process in Sarraute: the child responds to the command and commits the action for which she has been reprimanded. Here, we do share Maria Anna Mariani interpretation of the event. The scholar states:

explorent la sous-conversation, par le biais du discours indirect libre. Elles entrent ainsi dans les pensées et le discours de l'enfant, qui elle-même perçoit plus ou moins clairement le discours implicite des adultes. Cette « oralisation » générale permet un va-et-vient très souple entre le présent et le passé, entre l'analyse et le mime» Philippe Lejeune, *L'Autobiographie en France*, op. cit., p. 87.

solution d'une de ces paroles, d'un moment, d'un climat, d'une situation: pourquoi fut-elle prononcé, qui cherchait à blesser qui, et comment» Bruno Vercier, «Nouveau Roman et autobiographie: *Enfance* de Nathalie Sarraute», *French Literature Series*, n. xii, 1985, p. 162-170, p. 165.

The lethal verdict of the word of order is countered by a creative word. To develop an escape power, to oppose the verdict, one must first identify one's own linguistic tonality and innovative word. That is, to trace a distinct stylistic territory around oneself, which for Sarraute is that inhabited by tropisms, figuratively evoked by the soft, greyish substance that leaks out of the sofa once the lining has been torn, once the verdict has been violated. As a result, the tear's memory is imbued with a metanarrative value, a value composed of at least three resonances modulated through levels of increasing generality: Sarraute's unique innovation; the specific transgression of writing an autobiography; the universal violence of every act of creation<sup>509</sup>

As Mariani correctly observes, the most instinctive interpretation is to decipher the greyish substance coming out of the stuffing as tropisms, that is, that portion of subconscious and pre-linguistic reality that the author brings to light through writing with the symbolic tear. At the same time, the

creatrice. Sviluppare una potenza di fuga, opporsi al verdetto, significa dunque individuare la propria tonalità linguistica e la propria parola innovatrice. Ovvero tracciare attorno a sé un inconfondibile territorio stilistico, che per Sarraute è quello abitato dai tropismi, evocati figurativamente dalla sostanza molle e grigiastra che fuoriesce dal divano una volta lacerata la fodera, una volta trasgredito al verdetto. Ecco così che il ricordo dello squarcio si carica di un valore metanarrativo, valore che si compone di almeno tre risonanze, modulabili attraverso livelli di generalità crescente, l'innovazione singolare di Sarraute; la trasgressione specifica della scelta di scrivere un'autobiografia; l'universale violenza di ogni atto di creazione» Maria Anna Mariani, op. cit., p. 42.

act of disobedience should be interpreted as a metaphor for the writer's decision to write an autobiographical narrative<sup>510</sup>.

From a stylistic-structural standpoint, we can see that the initial dialogical set-up, which is characterised by a transparent enunciative space - that is, a space in which only a single "je," a single "maintenant," and a single "ici" are identifiable - is complicated in favour of an «espace énonciatif opaque,»<sup>511</sup> in which the present space is more expanded than the enunciation: «The incipit constituted by the scene with the double is separated from this scene only by a typographical blank. There is no explicit logical link, but a suggested parallelism, an analogy that the reader is called upon to detect in the refiguration in the present of this past scene, which then takes on the value of a parable»<sup>512</sup>. When memory takes shape, it takes on an acoustic form; words heard as a child return to the present and resonate with acoustic force. What is interesting, if we compare the first paragraph to the second, is the sudden resurrection of the past in the present: immediately after using a passé composé in the sentence «il y a si longtemp ou elles ont penetré en moi», the narrator employs the present tense with «elles appuient, elles pèsent». A reiteration in the present of the violent force of the words heard - underlined by the semantic variation of

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>510</sup> See: Anthony Newman, «Enfance de l'écriture, l'écriture d'Enfance», in: Sabine Raffy (ed.) *Autour de Nathalie Sarraute. Actes du Colloque International de Cerisy-la-Salle des 9 au 19 juillet 1989*, Les Belles Lettres, Paris 1995.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>511</sup> Edit Bors, art. cit., p. 314.

<sup>«</sup>L'incipit constitué par la scene avec le double n'est séparé de cette scene que par un blanc typographique. Il n'ya pas de lien logique explicité, mais un *parallélisme* suggéré, une analogie que le lecteur est appelé à détecter dans la refiguration au present de cette scene passée qui revêt dès lors valeur de parabole» Monique Gosselin, op. cit., p. 43.

"puissance" and "poids" – relived in and through writing superimposes childhood memory on an internalised dimension of experience<sup>513</sup>.

In this first fragment, the use of the *passé composé* assumes a mediating function between two types of present: the present of the dialogue and the historical present that is the main source of the autobiographical narrative embedded in that dialogue. In the use of the present to recall the past, there is an intention on Sarraute's part to show the process of thinking in the making and, consequently, a desire to prevent the crystallisation that words operate on those fragile illuminations of the spirit that the author calls tropisms.

Through the sudden reiteration in the present, what Gosselin calls a «tropisme réactif»<sup>514</sup> develops. The prohibition imposed as a child resonates in the narrator's memory, taking on a castrating dimension that triggers an inner, instinctive impulse through which the reader witnesses the claim to autonomy immediately evoked by the similarity of the past and present intimate reaction: «[Sarraute] feels the weight of foreign signifiers rising in her again as she begins her account of her childhood, undermining her desire. Her sentence reflects the force of the depths spouting, the presence of the past in the present, which is immediately evoked by the similarity of the intimate reaction»<sup>515</sup>.

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>513</sup> About the violence of language, see: Rachel Boué, *Nathalie Sarraute*. *La sensation en quête de parole*, Parigi, L'Harmattan, 1997 and Anna Bucarelli, «La "déchirure de soi(e)"», art. cit.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>514</sup> Monique Gosselin, op. cit., p. 45.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>515</sup> «au moment de débuter son récit d'enfance, [Sarraute] sent monter en elle à nouveau ce poids des signifiants étrangers qui portent atteinte à son désir. Sa phrase refigure cette force de jaillissement des profondeurs, cette présence du passé dans le présent, immediatement convoquée par la similitude de la réaction intime» Monique Gosselin, *Enfance de Nathalie Sarraute*, op. cit., p. 45.

In her first memory, Sarraute emphasises the continuity of an auditory sensation as the meeting point of the present self with the past self. This technique makes the reading of *Enfance* a sensitive, non-analytical reading, following the movement of the text, perceiving it in the present of sensation. The experience recreated in Enfance's early memories through the resources of the present tense is that of a narrative consciousness interested in scenes rather than transitions; time is never understood as durée. The essence of the present tense, which is usually traced back to the transitory nature of an enunciative moment immediately absorbed by the past, becomes the marker of subjective realism in Enfance, it is a grammatical form that allows the plurality of narrating voices to implement their common quest: that of memory, of the authenticity of its sensation, relived in the present of its occurrence. In Sarraute's work, the insistence on the process of memory – given by temporal transitions, the marked use of suspension dots and continuous repetitions - destroys the myth of the autobiographical narrative as a moment of reconstruction and exploration of the past: instead, the use of present tenses presupposes an incomprehensible simultaneity, entirely mental, and serves as a container for a multiple identity being formed in and through language.

In *Enfance* then, in a similar but much more articulated manner than in *Die gerettete Zunge*, the refined and complex alternation of verbal tenses gravitating around the present tense of the dialogical and narrative parts allows the distance between the present self and the past self to vary incessantly and thus reconcile the presence of sensation with the critical detachment of the *a posteriori* analysis. In both cases, however, the emphasis on the importance of the words heard and the use of verbal tenses seem to fit perfectly with Nancy's definition of the "sonorous present". It will be useful to recall that, according to Nancy: «To be listening [...] is thus to enter into tension and to be on the lookout for a relation to self: *not*, it should be emphasized, a relationship to "me"...or to the "self" of the other...but to *the relationship in self*, so to speak, as it forms a "self" or a "to

itself" in general...». Nancy, as Derrida before, explains that through listening, the subject refers back to itself as "other". This referral allows for simultaneous listening to the world and to oneself, a reflexivity of sound that, in a phenomenological perspective, means being present to oneself, i. e., feeling.

In the case of Sarraute and Canetti, there is an *après coup* effect: the first memory – in its reiterated acoustic power – develops a symbolic power and relevance that is completely absent in the original episode. In the case of *Lessico famigliare*, one witnesses a completely different process. As Domenico Scarpa notes: «Perhaps the best way to approach *Lessico famigliare* is to transcribe the first sentence, in order to listen to its chords, to undulate over its commas and to grasp its first correspondences»<sup>516</sup>. The scholar not only recognises the importance of the famous *incipit*, but also positions its interpretation in the acoustic domain<sup>517</sup>. The scene that Ginzburg presents to her reader is, as in Canetti and Sarraute, the memory of a heard sentence. Here, too, we are dealing with a restriction imposed by an adult, but, unlike in Sarraute, the scene is not singulative, but iterative, and

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>516</sup> «La meilleure façon de s'approcher des *Mots de la tribu* est peut-être celle consistant à retranscrire la première phrase, afin d'en écouter les accords, d'onduler sur ses virgules et d'en saisir les premières correspondances» Domenico Scarpa, *Natalia Ginzburg. Pour un portrait de la tribu*, op. cit., p. 15.

Natalia Ginzburg si preannuncia, prima ancora che come un mosaico di volti, come una moltitudine di voci. La componente sonora del ricordo emerge vivida sin dal celebre incipit di *Lessico famigliare* che riesce a rendere sulla pagina la spontanietà del parlato medio-colto in un impasto linguistico di italiano standard, italiano regionale e singole voci dialettali» [The "crowd of memories" of which Natalia Ginzburg speaks is foretold, even before being a mosaic of faces, as a multitude of voices. The sound component of memories emerges vividly from the famous *incipit* of *Lessico famigliare*, which succeeds in rendering on the page the spontaneity of the "medio-colto" spoken language in a linguistic mixture of standard Italian, regional Italian and individual dialectal entries] Elisabetta Abignente, op. cit., p. 134.

immediately plunges the reader into the everyday dimension of the narrative:

At mealtimes in my father's house, when I was a little girl, if I or my sister or brothers knocked over a glass or dropped a knife, my father's voice would thunder,

'Don't be uncouth!'

If we mopped up our sauce with a bit of bread, he would shout, 'Don't be so clarty! Don't make such a slather!<sup>518</sup>

518 Natalia Ginzburg, The things we used to say, op. cit., p. 3. For the habitual reader of Ginzburg, the opening of Lessico famigliare will ring familiar. Not only because of its iconicity, but also because, in the collection of short stories published in 1962, the year before the volume was published, a very similar scene takes place. The essay is entitled Human Relationships and, in a very particular literary form between essay, short story, autobiography and memoir, Ginzburg describes a scene of everyday family life. The experience described is very similar to those "opaque" scenes that Gellen mentioned about Canetti. In the scene we both find the infantile and perceptive perspective (summarised in a generic "we" that recalls the "ghost-catcher" narrator of the "memorie di famiglia") and, at the same time, the act of listening to the words of adults: «When we are little children we have our eyes fixed above all on the world of adults, which is dark and mysterious to us. It seems absurd to us because we don't understand any of the words which adults say to one another [...] We don't understand the words which adults say to each other and we are not interested in them; [...] What interests us are the decisions of theirs that can alter our daily routine, the black moods that spoil lunches and suppers, the sudden slamming of doors, and voices reaised in the night. We realize that at any moment an unexpected storm – complete with the sound of doors being slammed and objects being hurled about – can irrupt from a fiew quiet words. We nervously listen for the slightest indication of violence in the voices that are talking [...] doors slam and we jump; angry words fly from one room to another - words that are incomprehensible to us and we do not try to understand them or to discover the murky reasons for their existence, we vaguely think that whatever reasons there may be must be horrible; we are so weighed down by all The reader is immediately immersed in everyday family life, hears the typical expressions of the *paterfamilias* and identifies with the perspective of a narrator whom Abignente refers to as a "narratore testimone" and who she characterises – using an auditory configuration – as a «tape recorder turned on to the past»<sup>519</sup>. This point of view, in its being essentially acoustic, is shared by Domenico Scarpa who, speaking of the narrator in *Lessico famigliare* states: «her voice is everywhere but [...] nowhere is her active presence perceived»<sup>520</sup>. This particular narratological disposition, as we already touched upon, makes Natalia Ginzburg's narrator «a narrator who conducts the story in the first person, although she never completely coincides with the protagonist of the story she is narrating. The space occupied by the narrator is, in fact, deliberately marginal, while the narrative centrality is reserved for the other members of the family – siblings, parents, grandparents – who turn out to be the real protagonists»<sup>521</sup>. What one witnesses is a game of focalisation conducted through voices. The

the absurd mystery of adult life» Natalia Ginzburg (1962), *Human Relationships*, in: *The Little Virtues*, op. cit., pp. 75-76.

solution with the only one using the "taper recorder" to describe Ginzburg's narrator, also Donald Haney states: «She is a kind of compassionate tape-recorder, and one that filters language so as to allow a subtly chosen pattern of assonances to arrive at the ear of the listener» Donald Heiney, «Natalia Ginzburg. The Fabric of Voices», The Iowa Review, vol. 1, n. 4, 1970, pp. 87-93, p. 89.

sua voce è dappertutto ma [...] dove in nessun luogo si coglie la sua attiva presenza» Domenico Scarpa quoted in: Elisabetta Abignente, «Memorie di famiglia. Un genere ibrido del romanzo contemporaneo», *Enthymema*, vol. xx, 2017, pp. 6-17, p. 8.

wun narratore che conduce il racconto in prima persona pur non coincidendo mai completamente con il protagonista della storia che sta narrando. Lo spazio ricoperto dall'io narrante risulta, infatti, volutamente marginale mentre la centralità narrativa è riservata agli altri membri della famiglia – fratelli, genitori, nonni – che risultano essere i veri protagonisti» Elisabetta Abignente, op. cit., p. 39.

family ties that Ginzburg presents are first and foremost word-based ties. As Domenico Scarpa notes:

The book in which she listens and transcribes, listens to voices, listens to her own voice, transcribes, and creates a voice, seems like something that is not particularly special, perhaps she herself thought she had not done anything special. It is a book that, born from the complexity of family ties that are ties of words, linguistic ties, continues to live and will live in the complicity between Natalia Ginzburg and her readership<sup>522</sup>

The acoustic dimension of the story is also conveyed through a style that is characterised by two main aspects: the marked use of indirect speech introduced by *verba dicendi* and the verb tenses used. The main tense used by Natalia Ginzburg, the one that characterises a large part of *Lessico famigliare* – as numerous critics have noted over time<sup>523</sup> – is the *imperfetto*. This verbal tense's fundamental property is its frequentative or iterative value. According to Paolo Giovannetti, the marked use of the imperfetto has a strong acoustic connotation, since it leads to a «marginalisation of the

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<sup>522 «</sup>È il libro nel quale lei ascolta e trascrive, ascolta delle voci, ascolta la sua voce, trascrive e crea una voce e questa sembra una cosa che non è niente di speciale, forse lei stessa pensava di non aver fatto niente di speciale, è un libro che, nato dalla complessità dei legami familiari che sono legami di parole, legami linguistici, continua a vivere e vivrà nella complicità tra Natalia Ginzburg e il pubblico dei suoi lettori» Domenico Scarpa, Lessico Famigliare di Natalia Ginzburg, Interview on Rai Cultura, 2020 [online] https://www.raicultura.it/letteratura/articoli/2020/03/Lessico-famigliare-di-Natalia-Ginzburg-66e2ef71-e094-44ad-8124-787f33726f9f.html [last consultation: 06/01/2023]

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>523</sup> See: Valeria Barani, «Il «latino» polifonico della famiglia Levi nel "Lessico famigliare" di Natalia Ginzburg, *Otto-Novecento*, vol. 15, n. 6, 1990, pp. 147-157; Luigi Fontanella, «Natalia Ginzburg between Fiction and Memory: A Reading of *Le voci della sera* and *Lessico Famigliare*», art. cit.;

narrator (or author) as a listener who disappears in order to *let their own listening do the talking*»<sup>524</sup>. As Cesare Segre points out in the introduction, this aspect allows the writer to keep the narrated memories at the stage of elaboration appropriate to the child who witnessed a series of usual and recurring scenes during her childhood, which she relives at the time of writing<sup>525</sup>. The deliberate use of the *imperfetto*, the most common fairytale time, defines the repetitiveness of actions and behaviours, situating the past – the narrative's main subject – in an indefinite, everyday temporality. The use of this verbal tense also reveals a lot about the overall perspective of the narrative. The *imperfetto*, as Luigi Fontanella has pointed out, is the same purely imaginative tense that children use in their games. Through the fiction of representation, actions in children's games take place in the context of a figurative present in which the action is transposed into a kind of already codified and habitual past<sup>526</sup>. Natalia Ginzburg's use of this

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>524</sup> «emarginazione del narratore (o autore) alla stregua di un ascoltatore che si dilegua per *far parlare il proprio ascolto* » Paolo Giovannetti, op. cit., p. 23 [emphasis in original].

<sup>525 «[...]</sup> nel narrare, Natalia tiene i ricordi allo stadio di elaborazione proprio della bambina, e poi ragazza, che le cose vide, o vi partecipò. Reprime dunque le considerazioni che sarebbero consentite dalla sua maturità di scrittrice; e affida tutto alla maestria dello stile e al gioco degli accostamenti. Di qui la freschezza dell'evocazione e il tono fiabesco del racconto; di qui anche la sintassi semplice, frasi per lo più brevi con scarsa ipotassi; di qui infine l'impianto comportamentistico, che privilegia atti e parole mettendo fra parentesi motivazioni e connessioni» [Natalia narrates her memories at the stage of elaboration proper to the child, and then the girl, who saw things or participated in them. She suppresses the considerations that her maturity as a writer would allow, and instead entrusts everything to the mastery of style and the play of juxtaposition. As a result, the evocation is fresh, and the story has a fairy-tale tone; as a result, the syntax is simple, with mostly short sentences and little hypotaxis; and finally, the structure is behaviourist, emphasising acts and words by putting motivations and connections in brackets.] Cesare Segre, Introduzione, in: Natalia Ginzburg, Lessico Famigliare, op. cit., p. V.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>526</sup> See: Luigi Fontanella, «Natalia Ginzburg between Fiction and Memory: A Reading of Le voci della sera and Lessico Famigliare», art. cit.;

verbal tense is clearly intentional, as evidenced by an essay she wrote on Goffredo Parise's Sillabario no. 1, in which she reflects on the narrative potential of the *imperfetto*, which the writer's work enhances:

What had shaken me most in Parise's stories were the verb tenses. I did not quite understand what was so important and poignant to me in his verb tenses. [...] I had the feeling that his imperfect was of a new, subtle, and peculiar quality, that it was a quick, sad and fleeting imperfect, and that it lay at the bottom of his stories as if reflecting the fleeting course of life<sup>527</sup>

In fact, also the *imperfetto* employed by Ginzburg is tinged with a nostalgic, sad, and fleeting tone. As Segre notes while analysing the *incipit* of the book:

It is evidently a scene that has been repeated many times. But in other cases, one would say that the situation is not usual; what makes it perceived as such is the *imperfetto*. [...] Situations and acts cannot be repeated identically; but they are brought towards the habitual by the *imperfetto*. In appearance, the characters in the narrative seem to take on puppet-like traits with this treatment: their appearance on the page inevitably leads to given words or phrases; or vice versa. Their aggregation to the frequentative is like a

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>527</sup> «Ciò che più mi aveva scosso nei racconti di Parise erano i tempi verbali. Non capivo bene cosa ci fosse, nei tempi dei suoi verbi, di così importante e struggente per me. [...] Avevo la sensazione che il suo imperfetto fosse di una qualità nuova, sottile e particolare, che fosse un imperfetto rapido, triste e fuggevole, e che stesse al fondo dei suoi racconti come riflettendovi il corso fuggevole della vita» Natalia Ginzburg (1974), *Vita immaginaria*, Einaudi, Torino, 2021.

trademark, which, as soon as they enter the scene, is overcome by their autonomous movements and speeches<sup>528</sup>

The incipit of *Lessico Famigliare*, albeit in a different way from Canetti and Sarraute, contains *in nuce* the true subject of the narrative: the language used by the Levi family. The family lexicon is both the protagonist of the narrative and the tool Ginzburg uses to juggle the overwhelming crowd of memories, to fix on the page faces and voices, to translate the elusive dimension of orality into writing<sup>529</sup>. In the famous Preface to *Cinque romanza brevi*, Ginzburg, speaking about the process of writing *Lessico Famigliare*, stated: «writing it down was for me completely like talking. I didn't care about the commas, the non-commas, the loose mesh, the tight

<sup>528</sup> «Si tratta evidentemente di una scena che si ripeté molte volte. Ma in altri casi si direbbe che la situazione non sia abituale; ciò che la fa percepire come tale è l'imperfetto. [...] Situazioni ed atti non possono essere ripetuti identici; ma sono portati verso l'usualità dall'imperfetto. In apparenza i personaggi del raccontare sembrano assumere con questo trattamento tratti marionettistici: la loro apparizione sulla pagina porta inevitabilmente a date parole o frasi; o viceversa. In verità la loro aggregazione al frequentativo è come un marchio di fabbrica, che, non appena essi entrano in scena, viene superato dai loro movimenti e discorsi autonomi» Cesare Segre, *Introduzione*, in: Natalia Ginzburg, *Lessico Famigliare*, op. cit., p. VI.

L'Approdo [online], Ginzburg states: «mi è venuto questa estate | quando ho scritto il racconto Lui e io | di sentire il desiderio di raccontare proprio la realtà senza mescolare nessun element fantastico [...] devo dire che riguardo al titolo non ho avuto esitazioni | perché | ero partita pensando | così | avevo l'idea di scrivere un piccolo racconto sulle frasi che usavano dire nella mia famiglia [...] questo piccolo racconto appunto sì | quando ho cominciato a enumerare queste frasi mi sono accorta che c'era dietro tutto un mondo | che c'era dietro la mia infanzia | la mia vita | e così | mi si è moltiplicato in mano» [This summer, when I wrote the short story He and I, I felt the desire to tell the truth without mixing in any fantastic elements [...] I must say that I had no hesitations about the title because I started out thinking that I had the idea of writing a short story about the sayings of my family [...] This little story, yes, when I began to enumerate these sayings, I realised that there was a whole world behind it, a world behind my childhood, my life, and so it multiplied in my hand].

mesh: nothing, nothing»<sup>530</sup>. The writer's facility and unconstrained approach to assembling the mosaic of her family can be understood in the context of her primary objective, which was not so much to trace her genealogy but to begin with the very utterances she heard in her childhood:

Last summer, I thought I'd write a short story, or rather a short essay, in which the sayings, words, and stories I'd heard as a child were enumerated on a thin thread of childhood memories [...]. But when I started writing in late autumn, I knew right away that I wasn't going to write a short story or an essay, but a book<sup>531</sup>

On a more structural/stylistic note, from a narratological point of view, in the *incipit*, author and narrator correspond; in a frame with intense autobiographical overtones, the testimony of a homodiegetic and intradiegetic narrator unfolds, with allodiegetic tendencies (the narrator is present within the narrative, but recounts events in which the other characters are the main protagonists), during a fixed and external focalisation, since the entire narration is the result of an exclusive focus of the author, according to her modest point of view. Right from the start, however, it is clear the difference in the narrative fabric we are dealing with, a text that is indeed autobiographical, in which, however, the protagonist is

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scriverlo era per me del tutto come parlare. Non mi importava niente delle virgole, delle non virgole, della maglia larga, della maglia stretta: niente, niente» Natalia Ginzburg, *Prefazione* in: *Cinque romanzi brevi*, Einaudi, Torino 1964, quoted in: Id., *Opere, vol. 1*, Mondadori, Milano 1986, p. 1134.

scrivere un breve racconto, o meglio un breve saggio, dove fossero enumerate, su un tenue filo di ricordi d'infanzia, le frasi, le parole e le storie che avevo nell'infanzia udito, che nella mia infanzia usavano ripetere sempre [...]. Ma quando, nel tardo autunno, cominciai a scrivere, mi accorsi fin dalle prime pagine che avrei scritto non un piccolo racconto o saggio, ma un libro» «Una domanda a Natalia Ginzburg», in "Corriere della Sera", 7 aprile 1963.

almost always absent.<sup>532</sup> This aspect, as we saw, is already clarified by Natalia Ginzburg in the foreword to the novel. According to Abignente, the purpose of this type of narration would not only be to glorify one's past or nostalgically relive memories, but to:

to plumb the subsoil of parental dynamics, of the horizontal and vertical relationships that gave body and shape to their family structure, with speleological passion and, in some cases, documentary obsession, to understand themselves through an anatomical study of the cell of the society that generated them. The community level of family life thus intersects with the individual level of one's own personality development, giving rise to pages that, while employing a wide range of expressive means, are united by

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<sup>532</sup> As Cesare Garboli notes: «Sembra un paradosso che Natalia Ginzburg, la quale nei suoi libri non fa che parlare di sé, non ci abbia mai raccontato niente di se stessa. [...] della persona della Ginzburg – di "Natalia" – seguitiamo a sapere soltanto che è nata ultima in una numerosa famiglia ebraica di origini triestine, i Levi, trapiantati a Torino, in fondo di se stessa con le sue parole, la Ginzburg non ci ha raccontato niente di piú. In quella specie di illustre dagherrotipo che è Lessico famigliare, la vita degli adulti di casa Levi ci era descritta in minimi e perfino indiscreti particolari. Ma nulla ci era detto sull'infanzia di chi diceva "io"» [It seems a paradox that Natalia Ginzburg, who in her books does nothing but talk about herself, has never told us anything about herself. [...] Of the person of Ginzburg – of "Natalia" – all we know is that she was born the last into a large Jewish family of Triestine origin, the Levi family, transplanted to Turin. In that kind of illustrious daguerreotype that is Lessico Famigliare, the life of the adults in the Levi household is described to us in minute and even indiscreet detail. But nothing at all has been told us about the childhood of the person who says "I"] Cesare Garboli, Introduzione, in: Natalia Ginzburg, Mai devi domandarmi, Einaudi, Torino, 1970, Ebook.

the common intent of reconstructing, and Freudianly imagining, one's own roots<sup>533</sup>

In Ginzburg's narrative, therefore, we witness a real shift from interiority to anteriority implemented through an investigation of familiar language. The spoken words heard during childhood, are thus an essential element in the affirmation of the most tenacious familiar bonds; They function as connective tissue of familiar life, not just an external means of expression. As Italo Calvino argued while presenting the first edition of the book:

A family is made up of voices that weave across the table at lunch and dinner, of rumblings, banter, unconnected jokes, and phrases that are repeated on any given occasion; it is a language that only those who practise it understand, a network of memories and references. Natalia Ginzburg, who set out to recall her family's lexicon, the interjections of her parents and siblings, soon realised that she was after the mysterious quid that characterises and binds precisely this entity we call family, the sense and rhythm that accompanies us in our lives even after we have left the roof and the altar of our childhood<sup>534</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>533</sup> «scandagliare, con passione speleologica, e in alcuni casi con ossessione documentaria, il sottosuolo delle dinamiche parentali, delle relazioni orizzontali e verticali che hanno dato corpo e forma alla propria struttura familiare per capire se stessi attraverso uno studio anatomico della cellula della società che li ha generate. Il piano comunitario della vita in famiglia si incrocia così con quello individuale dello sviluppo della propria personalità dando vita a pagine che, pur ricorrendo a una notevole eterogeneità di mezzi espressivi, risultano legate dal commune intent di ricostruire, e freudianamente immaginare, le proprie radici» Elisabetta Abignente, op. cit., p. 6.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>534</sup> «Una famiglia è anche – forse soprattutto – fatta di voci che si intrecciano attraverso la tavola a pranzo e a cena, di rimbrotti, di scherzi, di battute

If one continues reading the first few pages of the book, one will notice that the narrator remains absent. After the opening scene at the dinner table, Ginzburg describes – for several pages – her father's attitudes and habits, just before introducing the other character who plays the main role in the story: her mother Lidia. It is only after several anecdotes that, for the first time, the reader encounters the protagonist. The first individual image into which Ginzburg herself is included, however, is not an "I", but a "we", and it is the passage considered to be the true and proper declaration of poetics, as well as a synopsis of the entire *Lessico*:

There are five of us brothers and sisters. We live in different cities, some of us abroad, and we don't write to each other very often. When we meet we can be indifferent or distrait. But among us a single phrase is enough. A single word, a single phrase is all that it takes, one of those old sayings that we heard repeated endlessly during our childhood. We only need to say 'we haven't come to Bergamo to take a summer break' to rediscover at a stroke our ancient bonds and our childhood and youth, linked indissolubly to those words and sayings. One of those words and sayings would be enough to make us recognize each other in the darkness of a cave or among a million people. Those sayings are our Latin, the lexicon of our by-gone days,

slegate, di frasi che si ripetono a ogni data occasione; è un linguaggio comprensibile solo a chi lo pratica, una rete di ricordi e richiami. Natalia Ginzburg, partita per rievocare il lessico della sua famiglia, gli intercalari dei suoi genitori e dei suoi fratelli, si è accorta presto che ciò che stava inseguendo era il *quid* misterioso che caratterizza e lega appunto questa entità che chiamiamo famiglia, il senso e il ritmo che ci accompagna nelle nostre vite anche quando ci siamo staccati dal tetto e dal desco della nostra fanciullezza» Italo Calvino quoted by Domenico Scarpa, «Cronistoria», In: Natalia Ginzburg, *Lessico famigliare*, op. cit., pp. 219-220.

they are like the hieroglyphics of the Egyptians or the Sumerians, the evidence of a vital nucleus which has ceased to exist but which still survives in its texts, preserved from the fury of the waters and from the corrosions of time. Those sayings are the basis of our family solidarity, which will exist for as long as we remain on this earth, reviving and recreating itself at the opposite sides of the globe whenever one of us says 'my dear Signor Lipmann' and at once my father's impatient voice rings in our ears. 'Enough of this story! I've already heard it more times than I can say! 535

Family language, made up of distinctive expressions often tracing phrases said by others and ironically absorbed by the family, serves as the primary nucleus of the narration and the palpable heart of a past alive in words, the only ones that have survived the ravages of time and can restore it by regenerating it in memory:

At a deeper level, the same language, is, so to speak, allowed to perform an operation with a complex anthropological texture: a funeral ritual of reunion with the beloved voices lost in the afterlife coinciding with the reconstruction of the idiolect of one's own family tribe<sup>536</sup>

The lexicon, which is the familiar heritage and the glue of unity between its members, has no proprietary mark, it is not traced back to

535 Natalia Ginzburg, *The things we used to say*, op. cit., pp. 21-22.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>536</sup> «A un livello più profondo, la medesima lingua, media e parlata, è, per così dire, abilitata a svolgere un'operazione dalla complessa trama antropologica: un rituale funerario di ricongiungimento con le amate voci perdute nell'aldilà coincidente con la ricostruzione dell'idioletto della propria tribù familiare» Enrico Testa, op. cit., p.298.

subjectivity. It is a heritage that the narrator simply takes charge of transmitting:

If we were to ask who ultimately is the subject of the narrative, whether it is the figure or the space surrounding it, the most accurate answer would be neither one nor the other, but rather the uncertain and changing outline that separates them: the air where the words still resound, suspended and fixed even when the actors of the dialogue and their storyteller have already left the scene. Viewed in this perspective, the text constitutes the writer/storyteller's autobiography only insofar as it narrates the story of her encounter with the world of words: the childhood passion for language and storytelling<sup>537</sup>

## 4.3. Paternal figures

Among the elements listed by Sergio Zatti in his "Morfologia del racconto d'infanzia", one of the most important is the different influence of the parents on the character of the protagonist. Zatti states:

What prevails here is a split vision of the parental imago: the child tends to polarise the parents' influence by

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>537</sup> «Se ci si chiede chi sia infine il soggetto della narrazione, se la figura o lo spazio che la circonda, a questo punto la risposta più accurata sarebbe né l'uno né l'altro, piuttosto l'incerto e mutevole contorno che li separa: l'aria dove le parole risuonano tuttora, sospese e fissate anche quando gli attori del dialogo e la loro cantastorie hanno ormai lasciato le scene. Visto in questa prospettiva il testo costituisce l'autobiografia della scrittrice/cantastorie solo in quanto narra la storia del suo incontro col mondo delle parole: la passione infantile per la parola e il racconto» Giuliana Minghelli, art. cit., p. 159.

making them the recipients of antithetical feelings [...] or by dramatising the affective and pedagogical opposition of which he/she is the object. It thus happens that mother and father often assume the narratological roles of helper and/or opponent in the dynamics of the family novel<sup>538</sup>

As we saw, in twentieth century self narratives, the écriture de soi increasingly resembles the récit de filiation. Parental figures assume more and more a symbolic function in the construction of the self. In our three texts, parental figures play a central role. Their words shape the narrative, the relationship they have with the protagonist defines the structure of the text and their importance underpins the protagonist's destiny as a future artist.

«In the beginning was the word and the word was the father. It is from this authority that the world of *Lessico famigliare* begins»<sup>539</sup>, Minghelli notes with respect to the beginning in *medias res* of *Lessico famigliare*. In the first cluster of memories collected by Natalia Ginzburg, almost all of them feature the father, or to be more precise, the paternal voice.

The father's words make real cuts, subjecting the world of everyday life to strict censorship down to its most minute nuances. Thus, experience is ordered by a network of prescriptions and behaviours that encircles the family in a web of rituals. The paternal lexicon – while regulating the times

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>538</sup> «Prevale in questo ambito una visione scissa dell'*imago* parentale: il figlio tende a polarizzare l'influenza dei genitori facendone i destinatari di sentimenti antitetici [...] o drammatizzando l'opposizione affettiva e pedagogica di cui è oggetto. Accade così che madre e padre assumono spesso i ruoli narratologici di aiutante e/o oppositore nella dinamica del romanzo familiare» Sergio Zatti, *Morfologia del racconto d'infanzia*, in: Stefano Brugnolo (ed.), op. cit. p. 38.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>539</sup> «All'inizio era la parola e la parola era il padre. È da questa autorità che il mondo di *Lessico famigliare* prende l'avvio» Giuliana Minghelli, art. cit., p. 160.

and spaces in the household – also gives rhythm to the narrative style. Starting with page one, we get accustomed with Giuseppe Levi's rules and slang terms:

He used to comment over lunch on the people he had meet during the day. He was very severe in his judgements and thought everyone a fool. A fool to him was a "half-wit". 'He seemed a proper half-wit to me', he would say, criticizing some new acquaintance of his. As well as the 'half-wits' there were the 'yahoos'. To my father, a 'yahoo' was anyone who had a gauche, awkward and bashful manners, anyone who wore the wrong clothes, who didn't know how to climb mountains or who was ignorant of foreign languages<sup>540</sup>

"Half-wits" and "yahoos" are just some of the terms that characterise everyday life in the Levi's household<sup>541</sup>. According to Peg Boyle, one should consider the Levi's Lexicon as a «a dictionary, or, more precisely, an assemblage of words meningful only to initiates, or a collection of phrases, any one of which, when uttered, no matter when or where, will at once identify the speaker as a member of a particular tribe»<sup>542</sup>. The word tribe perfectly suits *Lessico famigliare*, which, as Cesare Garboli notes, can be considered a «a tribal novel... in which the father figure dominates»<sup>543</sup>.

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>540</sup> Natalia Ginzburg, *The things we used to say*, op. cit., p. 3.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>541</sup> The paternal vocabulary is broad and complex. Even for the Italian reader, some terms sound unfamiliar because they do not belong to the standard language or are now obsolete. For an explanation in English of some of the most common expressions used in *Lessico famigliare*, see: Luigi Fontanella, art. cit., p. 39.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>542</sup> Peg Boyers, Afterword, in: Natalia Ginzburg, *Family Lexicon*, New York Review Books, New York, 2017, p. 210.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>543</sup> «romanzo tribale... dove la figura paterna è dominante» Cesare Garboli, quoted in Giuliana Minghelli, art. cit., p. 13.

According to Peg Boyle, Giuseppe Levi is the strongest character in the book:

from the start – literally, the book's opening – Ginzburg exposes him as something much less than an idealized paterfamilias. We meet him on page one as a routinely explosive – bordering on abusive – father who screams at his children and and insults everyone at the dinner table, including his wife. Arrogant, overearing, effusively opinionated<sup>544</sup>

The father's shouts and imperatives define the grammar of prohibition, the strict law of what you can do and say to be accepted in the family tribe. The paternal attitude of severe judgement is not limited to the upbringing of children, but is universalised, affecting whatever "novelty" is introduced into the home by one of its members. Thus, for example, the victim of paternal wrath is also modern art in general: «Clart and slather were also my father's terms for modern art, which he couldn't abide»<sup>545</sup>.

From the outset, Giuseppe Levi appears to be a strict man, a scientist dedicated to the adherence to a self-imposed discipline, the same discipline he demands from the rest of the family, namely respect for the rules of behaviour dictated by him. Despite being part of Turin's educated bourgeoisie, a fervent anti-fascist, broad-minded and innovative, he «used to regard anything new and unfamiliar with a surly and suspicious eye»<sup>546</sup>.

In the relationship with the father in *Lessico famigliare*, Natalia is absent. We hear the father address his eldest children, and – much more often – his wife Lidia, but never directly to the protagonist, who is always

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>544</sup> Peg Boyers, Afterword, in:op. cit., p. 210.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>545</sup> Natalia Ginzburg, *The things we used to say*, op. cit., p. 3.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>546</sup> Ibid., p. 51.

positioned as a listener in the corner of scenes that do not concern her personally<sup>547</sup>.

Although the descriptions of Giuseppe Levi present him as a gruff father, the portrait Natalia offers is «somehow affectionate»<sup>548</sup>. Giuseppe Levi may have been a "cumbersome" presence in Natalia's upbringing, but the intellectual physiognomy that the writer offers us of her father in *Lessico famigliare* presents almost caricatural traits; of a man, a father, gruff but never tyrannical, solitary, yet curious to participate in the family dynamics:

We children and my mother would spend the evening round the table. My father would be reading at the opposite

<sup>547</sup> Again, because of that "reticence" to which we have already alluded, Natalia talks about her relationship with her father in a short story entitled *I baffi* bianchi, where she says: «Il terrore aveva per me i tratti di mio padre; la sua fronte aggrottata, le sue lentiggini, le sue lunghe guance rugose e scavate, le sue sopracciglia arruffate e ricciute, la sua torva spazzola rossa» [Terror had my father's features for me; his frowning forehead, his freckles, his long, wrinkled, hollowed-out cheeks, his shaggy, curled eyebrows, his grim red brush] And she continues saying: «Quanto a me, non dicevo bugie a mio padre semplicemente perché non avevo il coraggio di rivolgergli mai la parola: avevo di lui una sacra paura. Se accadeva che mi chiedesse qualcosa, gli rispondevo a voce tanto bassa, che lui non capiva e urlava che non aveva capito: mia madre gli diceva allora cos'avevo detto, e le mie parole, nella voce di mia madre, mi sembravano una miseria; facevo un sorriso largo e stupido: il sorriso che s'apriva sulla mia faccia, quando sentivo tremare in me la paura e la vergogna d'aver paura» [As for me, I did not tell lies to my father simply because I did not have the courage to ever speak to him: I was sacredly afraid of him. If it happened that he asked me something, I answered him in such a low voice that he did not understand and shouted that he had not understood: my mother would then tell him what I had said, and my words, in my mother's voice, seemed to me a misery; I made a wide and stupid smile: the smile that opened on my face, when I felt the fear and shame of being afraid trembling in me] Natalia Ginzburg, I baffi bianchi, in: Id., Mai devi domandarmi, Ebook.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>548</sup> Peg Boyers, Afterword, in: Natalia Ginzburg, op. cit., p. 211.

side of the house, and from time to time he would look in on the room where we were gathered to chat and play games<sup>549</sup>

Giuseppe carries out a regimen of self-education characterised by a sober and narrow lifestyle: cold showers in the morning, long walks in the mountains or in the city, defined daily organisation. Natalia sums up the paternal character in a short list: «The things my father valued and esteemed were socialism, England, Zola's novels, the Rockefeller Foundation and the mountains and guides of the Aosta Valley»<sup>550</sup>. Anything that goes beyond its scope of interest is brutally branded as "sempiezzo" (yahooish). His rigidity is also transferred to his cultural interests, which Natalia describes in detail:

In the evenings, my father used to work in his study; at any rate, he would correct the proofs of his books and paste in various illustrations. However, sometimes he would read novels. 'Is that novel any good, Beppino?' my mother would ask. 'Not on your life! It's rubbish! Balderash!' he would reply, shrugging his shoulders. All the same, he would read it with the keenest attention, smoking his pipe while he did so and brushing ash away from the page. When he came back from a journey he would always have detective novels which he had bought at station bookstalls and he would finish reading them in the evening in his study. They were usually in English or German, since perhaps it seemed to him less frivolous to read such novels in a foreign language.

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>549</sup> Natalia Ginzburg, *The things we used to say*, op. cit., p. 5.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>550</sup> Ibid., p. 15.

'Balderdash!' he would say, shrugging his shoulders, but all the same he would read right to the final line<sup>551</sup>

Giuseppe Levi's reading routine reveals much about his character; reading is for him an activity to be performed in the evening, a recreational moment intended as a rest from work and, even though his personal taste falls back on a "frivolous" genre such as the detective novel, his self-imposed discipline leads him to read in English or German, almost as a real «esercizio linguistico» <sup>552</sup>. Although his assessment of evening readings is always a "simpiezzo!", his vivid curiosity leads him to read «with the keenest attention» and «right to the final line». As noted by Andrea Rondini, in Giuseppe Levi's case, «the reading of detective novels presents itself as a circumvention of a prohibition, a prohibition that comes from the subject itself» <sup>553</sup>, since he had «a dim and confused dislike of the literary world, a world completely unknowkn in our house given that no one came to visit us except biologists, scientists and engineers» <sup>554</sup>.

As Natalia Ginzburg points out, the family tribe and the personalities that revolve around it can be divided into two main clusters; the first represented by her father and his colleagues, «with their mountains and 'black rocks' and crystals and insects»<sup>555</sup>, is the world of science and facts, which leaves no room for fable-like gimmicks. On the other side are the writer's two older siblings, Mario, Paola and their friend Terni: «who

<sup>551</sup> Ibid., pp. 54-55.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>552</sup> Elisabetta Abignente, *Natalia Ginzburg. Lessico Famigliare* in: Francesco de Cristofaro and Marco Viscardi (eds.), *Il Borghese fa il mondo*, Donzelli, Roma, 2017, pp. 291-299, p. 297.

station di vieto, divieto che proviene dal soggetto stesso» Andrea Rondini, «Dalla voce alla parola. Competenze culturali e di lettura in *Lessico famigliare* di Natalia Ginzburg», *Italianistica*, n. 3, 2003, pp. 401-416, p. 404.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>554</sup> Natalia Ginzburg, *The things we used to say*, op. cit., p. 59.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>555</sup> Ibid., p. 50.

loathed the mountains and liked warm rooms and staying indoors with the windows shut, shaded lights and cafés. They liked Casorati's paintings, Pirandello's plays, Verlaine's poetry, Gallimard Press editions and Prousty<sup>556</sup>. These are «two incommunicable worldsy<sup>557</sup>, which the child observes and absorbs, not knowing which one to belong to, drawn by both: «I didn't yet know which I would choose. Both of them appealed to me. I had not yet decided whether to spend my life studying beetles, chemistry and botany, or whether I would paint pictures or write novels instead»<sup>558</sup>. If, on the one hand, in the scientifict world «everything was clear and logical and took place in broad daylight, there were no mysteries or secrets»<sup>559</sup>, on the other hand, the world of humanistic culture holds an unexpected fascination for the narrator: «there was something mysterious and unfathomable that inspired in me a mixture of fascination and fear»<sup>560</sup>. It is a secret and incomprehensible world that, in the words of the father, is branded as "fufignezzi". Giuseppe Levi's relationship with the world of humanistic culture is ambivalent; although he repeatedly demonstrates his distrust of «he equivocal literary world»<sup>561</sup>, he is also a reader. The mistrustful judgement on literature also extends to his children's personal tastes; despite his opinion on Proust «He must have been a pain in the neck!»<sup>562</sup>, he is courious: «He always used to worry that the books Terni brought to the house might not be 'suitabubble' for us. 'Is it suitabubble for Paola? He asked my mother, leafing through A la recherche and reading a sentence or two here and there. 'It looks pretty tiresome stuff', he said, then, throuwing the book aside, and the fact that it was 'tiresome stuff' reassured

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<sup>556</sup> Ibid.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>557</sup> Ibid.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>558</sup> Ibid., pp. 50-51.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>559</sup> Ibid., op. cit., p. 51.

<sup>560</sup> Ibid.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>561</sup> Ibid., p. 62.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>562</sup> Ibid., p. 51.

him a bit»<sup>563</sup>. In his censorious attitude, Giuseppe is nevertheless permissive. According to the reading provided by Andrea Rondini, the *pater familias*' words constitute a permission for his daughter, a green light that will be decisive for her future:

Giuseppe, in short, hands over a destiny. It can then be added that Proust will not be entirely harmless: not so much on a moral level as on a cultural, existential one. The very translation of the *Recherche* will sanction the narrator's autonomy as a reader and as a person, coinciding with editorial work and separation from the family<sup>564</sup>

In my view, the connection between paternal permission and the success of the future writer seems arbitrary to say the least. Giuseppe Levi, is one of the characters who does not change psychologically within the story, as he is already formed and proud: socialist, anti-fascist, authoritarian, petulant, stubborn, mistrustful, reluctant to change his mind, severe and proud; contemptuous and critical of most things, above all of things he did not understand and was not interested in. On the other hand, a very strong note of irony, tenderness, insecurity, and perennial worry shines through in his stubborn and implacable, irascible character. According to Clementelli, Giuseppe Levi's description is part of Ginzburg's natural narrative tendency, namely that of:

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<sup>563</sup> Ibid.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>564</sup> «Giuseppe, insomma, consegna un destino. Si può allora aggiungere che Proust non sarà del tutto innocuo: non tanto sul piano morale quanto culturale, esistenziale: proprio la traduzione della *Recherche* sancirà un'autonomia della narratrice in quanto lettrice e in quanto persona, coincidendo con il lavoro editoriale e il distacco dalla famiglia» Andrea Rondini, art. cit., p. 405. Rondini here is referring to Natalia Ginzburg's translation of the first volume of Proust's Recherche, *La strada di Swann*, for the publishing house Einaudi.

always make the woman the protagonist in all the stories that revolve around that family unit that is so congenial to her [as a writer], while the men recede into more blurred planes, awkward with a more fragile nature, closed in a more restricted and more ambiguous world, shy of decisive gestures: shadowy figures that contrast with the female figures eager for light<sup>565</sup>

We are, in this case, far from a symbolic order of the father, whose language names and defines the real, since, as Minghelli rightly notes: «like the ogre in fairy tales, whose prohibitions exist to be constantly challenged and broken, [the father] does not have a monopoly on the act of naming and thus ordering the world. Soon, another "lexicon" is set up in opposition to his, relegating him to the margins of the family table» 566. The father's word enshrining a system of laws and obligations is opposed by the mother's affabulatory language, the true matrix of Ginzburg's narrative style:

It is this same tension that Michail Bakhtin places at the heart of language in his writings on literary dialogism. The word of the father expresses the horizon of language in its normative character, a "monoglossia" opposed to the "heteroglossia" of the mother who represents the gap, the discourse of the polymorphous and multifaceted "other". [...]

sempre della donna la protagonista in tutte le storie che si muovono intorno a quell nucleo familiare che le è congeniale, mentre gli uomini recedono verso piani più sfocati, impacciati da un'indole più fragile, chiusi in un mondo più ristretto e più ambiguo, schivi di gesti risolutivi: figure d'ombra che contrastano con le figure femminili avide di luce» Elena Clementelli, op. cit., pp. 43-44.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>566</sup> «come l'orco delle fiabe, i cui divieti esistono per essere costantemente sfidati e infranti, [il padre] non ha un monopolio sull'atto di nominare e quindi di ordinare il mondo. Al suo 'lessico' se ne contrappone presto un altro che lo relega ai margini del desco familiare» Giuliana Minghelli, art. cit., p. 161.

The narrator's loving memory is guided precisely by the dialogue between a language that imposes a rigid grammar on the world and a language that is performance, associative play. If the score of *Lessico famigliare* is dominated by the counterpoint between the father's word and the mother's, her poetics is inspired solely by maternal memories and anecdotes. It is not the paternal imperatives, but rather it is the mother's voice that conveys the family history and the pleasure in passing it on to the narrator; only to her belongs the art of storytelling<sup>567</sup>

By contrast, the descriptions of Canetti's and Sarraute's fathers are very different from Ginzburg's father. Monique Gosselin notes that in *Enfance*: «If the hymn to the mother is the usual one in most childhood stories, it is to the father that a hymn is addressed here. For in the beginning was the father, not the mother» The father is present in numerous childhood scenes and assumes the function of a teacher for Natacha. This father speaks rarely, but the words he uses reveal a creativity of tenderness, always a little restrained. One of the first scenes in which the father is

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scritti sul dialogismo letterario. La parola del padre esprime l'orizzonte della lingua nel suo carattere normativo, una monoglossia a cui si oppone l'eteroglossia della madre che rappresenta lo scarto, il discorso dell'altro polimorfo e variegate. [...] La memoria amorosa della narratrice è guidata esattamente dal dialogo tra una lingua che impone una rigida grammatica al mondo e una lingua che è performance, gioco associativo. Se lo spartito di *Lessico famigliare* è dominato dal contrappunto tra la parola del padre e quella della madre, la sua poetica è ispirata unicamente dai ricordi e aneddoti materni. Non sono gli imperativi paterni, ma piuttosto è la voce della madre a trasmettere alla narratrice la storia della famiglia e il piacere per la trasmissione, solo a lei appartiene l'arte del racconto» Giuliana Minghelli, art. cit., p. 161.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>568</sup> «Si l'hymne à la mère est de règle dans la plupart des récits d'enfance, c'est au père qu'un hymne est ici addressé. Car au commencement était le père, et non la mère» Monique Gosselin, op. cit., p. 123.

introduced to the reader, is a child's play scene, namely learning the days of the week:

I am standing in front of him between his parted legs, my shoulders are on a level with his knees... I am reciting the days of the week... Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, Saturday, Sunday... and then Monday, Tuesday... "That will do now, you know them..." "But what comes after that? "After that they start again..." "Always the same? But until when?" "Always." "But if I repeat it again and again? If I say it all day long? If I say it all night long? Will they come back again, Monday, Tuesday, always?" "Always, my little idiot..." his hand gently caresses my head, I feel something radiating from him... something that he keeps locked inside him, that he keeps in check, he doesn't like to show it, but it's there, I feel it, it was conveyed by his hand, which he quickly withdrew, by his eyes, by his voice which pronounces those diminutives that only he makes out of my name: Tashok, or the diminutive of this diminutive: Tashotshek... and also the comic name he gives me: Pigalitza... when I ask him what that is, he tells me it's the name of a little bird<sup>569</sup>

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>569</sup> Nathalie Sarraute, *Childhood*, op. cit., pp. 34-35. According to Raïd's reading, this is one of the scenes in which Sarraute appeals to her readers' childhood memories by directly creating an implicit dialogue reminding them to a world, we can say, "before words": «Un des objets d'*Enfance* est de rappeler à notre souvenir cette période, ce monde d'avant les mots, sans que cela soit facile de le donner à voir, au contraire : c'est un travail délicat d'archéologie linguistique et conceptuelle [...] Sarraute parvient à retrouver sous les mots, justement, qui sont habituellement les siens, l'étonnement de l'enfant qu'elle était : de ce que les jours de la semaine ont un nom, et qu'ils se succèdent toujours de la même manière Elle retrouve des interrogations réelles, que l'adulte dirait absurdes, mais qui sont

The father seems to communicate only slightly with words, but from his gestures and the nicknames with which he addresses the child, we understand his attention and care for his daughter. A similar scene is presented a little later in the text. The Russian-speaking father and the little girl confront each other over the way they pronounce certain words:

He often speaks French with me... I think he speaks it perfectly, it's just that he rolls his "r"... I try to teach him... Listen when I say Paris... listen carefully, Paris... and now say it like I do... Paris... no, that's not it... he imitates me comically, purposely exaggerating, as if he were hurting his throat... Parrris... He gets his own back when he teaches me to pronounce the Russian "r" properly, I must curl up the tip

légitimes, si on retrouve la voix et le point de vue de l'enfant. [...] L'idée d'une succession indéfinie des jours de la semaine, qui ne dépend d'aucune des circonstances qui importent dans nos vies (de la vie telle que l'enfant commence à la conceptualiser : le jour et la nuit, la veille et le sommeil, etc ), laisse l'enfant incrédule : la magie de l'écriture de Sarraute fait que, non content de comprendre abstraitement l'étonnement de l'enfant, on peut le partager le temps de la lecture [...] La question « Vraiment ? C'est comme ça qu'on fait ? » n'est pas tuée dans l'œuf, mais suffisamment respectée pour rester chez le futur écrivain, qui ne s'en laissera pas conter sur l'usage des mots, et qui ne se lassera pas de la reposer» [One of the purposes of *Enfance* is to remind us of this period, this world before words, without it being easy to show it, on the contrary: it is a delicate work of linguistic and conceptual archaeology [...] Sarraute succeeds in finding underneath the words, which are usually hers, the astonishment of the child she was: She finds real questions, which an adult would say are absurd, but which are legitimate, if one finds the voice and the point of view of the child. [...] The idea of an indefinite succession of days of the week, which does not depend on any of the circumstances that matter in our lives (of life as the child begins to conceptualise it: day and night, wakefulness and sleep, etc.), leaves the child incredulous: the magic of Sarraute's writing means that, not content with understanding the child's astonishment in the abstract, we can share in it during the reading [...] The question "Really? That's how it's done?" is not nipped in the bud, but respected enough to remain with the future writer, who will not let herself be fooled by the use of words, and who will never tire of asking it again] Layla Raïd, art. cit., pp. 97, 98.

of my tongue and press it against my palate, then uncurl it... but however hard I try... Ah, you see, now you're the one who can't do it... and we laugh, we love to make fun of each other in this way...<sup>570</sup>

Again, this is an instructional scene, but it is a mutual instruction. The father and daughter laugh together about their respective speech defects. Again, notes Raïd: «the scene is one of inclusion of the child and acceptance by the father, an acceptance to transmit his culture to an individual he recognizes as his heir. This reciprocity opens up the possibility for the child to become an agent in their relationship with language»<sup>571</sup>. The father's law in this case is not imposed. The language is inclusive and is dictated by a creativity that also involves the little protagonist. In recounting the moments with her father, there is a particularly important scene in which the narrator shows her father's attitude towards language:

At all events, the only thing I remember of what may have been said are these words, which I can still hear very distinctly: "Do you love me, Papa?..." with no anxiety in my tone, but something that was intended to be mischievous... it isn't possible for me to ask this question seriously, for me to say "do you love me" in any other way than as a joke... he hates words of that sort too much, and in the mouth of a child...

- Did you really already feel that, at that age?

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>570</sup> Nathalie Sarraute, *Childhood*, op. cit., p. 36.

scène est une scène d'inclusion de l'enfant, et d'acceptation par le père, acceptation de transmettre sa culture à un être qu'il reconnaît comme son héritier : la réciprocité ouvre la possibilité pour l'enfant de devenir agent dans son rapport à la langue» Layla Raïd, art. cit., p. 101.

-Yes, just as intensely as I would have felt it now, perhaps even more so... these are things that children perceive much better than adults do.

I knew that the words "you love me," "I love you," were among those that would make him wince, would make something buried inside him retreat, become even more deeply embedded... And, indeed, there is disapproval in his expression, in his voice... "Why do you ask me that?" Still with a touch of amusement in my tone... because this does amuse me, but also to prevent him rebuffing me in displeasure, "Don't talk nonsense" ... I insist: "Do you love me, tell me." "But you know I do..." "But I'd like you to say it. Say it, Papa, do you love me or not?" ... this time in a minatory, solemn tone of voice which allows him to sense what is coming next and incites him... it's only a game, only for fun... which incites him to let out these ridiculous, indecent words: "Of course I do, my silly little goose, I love you." Then he is rewarded for having agreed to play my game... "Well then, since you love me, you're going to give me..." You see, I didn't for a moment dream of obliging you to lay yourself bare, to disclose what you are filled with, what you hold back, what you only ever allow to escape in dribs and drabs, you might have let it trickle out just a little bit... "You're going to give me one of those balloons..."572

This scene also takes the form of a game between father and daughter. The little girl challenges her father with conventional words, "do you love me?" in defiance of her father's silence and his hatred for

572 Nathalie Sarraute, *Childhood*, op. cit., pp. 47-48.

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emphasis. The little girl knows that this kind of demonstration of affection upsets her father's way of feeling, but in spite of this she challenges him, giving rise to a tropism in him. The true feelings felt by the child are, however, expressed at the level of sub-conversation. As Gosselin points out:

There is therefore a challenge here, the awareness of a tropism to be warded off in the other. It is a real psychodrama in which she knowingly indulges, once again posing the question in the mode of musical variation that she has already encountered. The object requested is not for its own sake but as a token, as a sign of a deeper connivance, a means of deflating the words. The challenge is to test its power, to authorise a playful transgression that does not undermine the depths<sup>573</sup>

The father, with his silences and compliance, indulges his daughter. The words he utters are not dictated by convention but seem real to the child. The silences are the atmosphere that almost always accompanies the scenes with the father, whose love the girl tries to test once again:

I am lying in my little room that has been prepared for me [...] Here, I don't know why, I'm afraid when I'm alone in my room in the evenings, and Papa has agreed to stay with me until I fall asleep... He is sitting on a chair behind me and singing me an old lullaby... his bass voice is uncertain, sort of

<sup>573</sup> «Il y a donc là du défi, la conscience d'un tropisme à conjurer en l'autre.

C'est un vrai psychodrame auquel elle se livre sciemment, en posant une nouvelle fois la question sur ce mode de la variation musicale déjà rencontré. L'objet demandé ne l'est pas pour lui-même mais comme un gage, comme le signe d'une connivence plus profonde, un moyen de dégonfler les mots. L'enjeu est d'éprouver son pouvoir, d'autoriser une transgression ludique qui ne porte pas atteinte aux profondeurs» Monique Gosselin, op. cit., p. 124.

slightly husky... he doesn't sing very well, and this awkwardness makes what he sings even more touching... I can hear him so distinctly today that I can imitate him, and I admit that I sometimes do so... in that lullaby, he has replaced the words "my baby" by the diminutive of my name, which has the same number of syllables, Tashotshek... I gradually begin to doze off, his voice becomes farther and farther away... and then I hear behind me the faint sound of his chair, he must be standing up, he thinks I'm asleep, he's going to leave... and at once I lift a hand out from under the blanket to show him that I am still awake... or I hear the parquet floor creaking under his slow, prudent footsteps... he's going to half-open the door very quietly... so I give a little cough, a little grunt... but I don't speak, that might wake me up completely and I want to go to sleep, I want him to be able to go, I don't like making him stay...

- Really? Don't you rather think that when you felt him behind your back, his eyes riveted on you, singing under his breath more and more softly, tiptoeing the door, looking back one last time from the threshold to observe you, to make sure that you haven't suspected anything, and then, opening the door, shutting it again with immense precaution and, finally, free at last, making his escape... don't you rather think that what made you lift your hand, cough, grunt, was the desire to prevent what was in the air, what was about to happen, and which for you already smacked of veiled treachery, of abandon?
- I agree that all the signs seemed to be combined to make that occur to me... But I'm trying to feel myself back there, in that little bed, listening to my father standing up, walking over to the door... I lift my hand, I give a little

grunt... no, not yet, don't go, I shall be frightened, you promised me, we agreed that you would stay with me until I fell asleep, I'm doing my best, I shall manage, you'll see, I mustn't speak, I mustn't move too much, I simply want to show you, since we agreed, since there was a pact between us, I know you want to respect it, and I do, too, you know, I do respect it, I'm just showing you... you don't want me to be frightened... stay just a little bit longer, I can feel that i'm nearly asleep, then everything will be alright for me, I won't feel anything any more, and you can be quite happy to leave me, to go away... 574

What happens in this scene is a silent drama, which never materialises on the level of speech, but lays on the level of sousconversation. What happens in the memory – and what the narrator lives again – is a game based on listening. It is the noise of her father about to leave the room, which she, without verbalising it, wants to prevent. The voice of the double intervenes during the recollection to instil suspicion in the narrator, to cast the shadow of the sacrilege that is taking place: abandonment. The attempt of the double, however, has no effect, since: «the relationship with her father is based on a seamless agreement, perhaps because, unlike her mother, he distrusts words and fears emphasis: the clear, unspoken agreement teaches Tachok the value of silence when it is weighed down with truth. The novelist will remember this in developing her subconversations from which words emerge, weighed down by silences» <sup>575</sup>.

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>574</sup> Nathalie Sarraute, Childhood, op. cit., pp. 43-44.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>575</sup> «La relation avec le père repose sur un accord sans défaillance, peut-être parce que, contrairement à la mère, il se défie des mots et redoute l'emphase: la convention tacite et claire enseigne à Tachok la valeur du silence quand il est lesté d'un poids de vérité. La romancière s'en souviendra en élaborant ses sous-

The scenes with the father and the silences surrounding them will be clarified later when they are compared with the scenes in which the mother figure is present. In the scenes with the father – poor in codified language – affection is expressed in tones and gestures, unlike what we will see happening with the mother. The father communicates to young Natacha an affection («an invisible bond»<sup>576</sup>, «a strong bond between us, between us alone»<sup>577</sup>) that does not need to be encoded in language, so much so that it works as an anaesthetic when the daughter must utter the most painful words and choose whether to stay with her mother or her father after their separation:

[...] I feel it, it starts tugging at me... a pain like those latent ones that are revived by the surrounding atmosphere, cold, humidity... but my father's words... "If she is really so keen, she can quite well..." act like an anaesthetic that helps me to complete, without suffering too much, the extraction of what is still clinging... ah, I've done it, "I want to stay here." I don't know whether my father took me in his arms, I don't think so, that wouldn't have made me feel any more strongly the force of what unites us, and his total, unconditional support, nothing is demanded of me in exchange, no word must go and convey to him what I feel... and even if I didn't feel for him what other people call love, but which between him and me is not given a name, that wouldn't make any difference, my life would be just as essential to him... perhaps more so?... as his own... At all events, equally so. I knew that

conversations dont les mots émergent, alourdis de silences» Monique Gosselin, op. cit., p. 125.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>576</sup> Nathalie Sarraute, op. cit., p. 102.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>577</sup> Ibid., p. 135.

in the joy he was restraining there was also the certainty that I had made the right choice for myself<sup>578</sup>

Elias Canetti's father, like Sarraute's, is portrayed as an ideal father, a parent who takes time for his children and cares for them:

Every morning, before leaving for his office, he came to the nursery and had special, cogent words for each one of us. He was cheery and merry and always hit upon new antics. In the morning they didn't last long; it was before breakfast which he had with Mother downstairs in the dining room, and he hadn't read the newspaper yet. But in the evening, he arrived with presents; he brought something for everyone, on no day did he come home without bearing gifts for us<sup>579</sup>

Through this behaviour, the father builds a familiar and intimate relationship that is also perceived by the children as very affectionate. «I loved him like no one else in the world»<sup>580</sup>, says Canetti. For the child, the relationship with his father is «the most important thing in the world»<sup>581</sup>, so important that he completely neglects his relationship with his mother, even ignoring her.

From the very beginning of his life, young Elias develops an almost obsessive interest in the written word, attracted by its unknown authority. He imitates his father reading his newspaper. His father's explanation of the folly of such imitation awakens in him «an unquenchable yearning for letters»<sup>582</sup>. From the early years of his life, Canetti reevokes «a solemn

<sup>581</sup> Ibid., p. 40.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>578</sup> Ibid., pp. 155-156.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>579</sup> Elias Canetti, *The Tongue Set Free*, op. cit., p. 39.

<sup>580</sup> Ibid.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>582</sup> Ibid., p. 27.

memory of [the] hours»<sup>583</sup> spent with his father having the «finest conversations»<sup>584</sup>. Daily walks together marked the moment of intimacy between the two, during which the father communicated with his son in English; the memory of those moments comes alive at the sound of the lemmas that the father liked to have the narrator repeat: «He had told me the English word "meadow", and he asked me for it during every stroll. He felt it was an especially beautiful word; it has remained the most beautiful word in the English language for me. Another favorite word of his was "island"»<sup>585</sup>.

The relationship between father and son intensifies when, shortly after starting school «a thing solemn and exciting happened, which determined my entire life after that. Father brought home a book for me. [...] It was *The Arabian Nights*, in an edition for children»<sup>586</sup>. As Helen O' Sullivan notes:

it is through this symbolic exchange, the translation from the written to the spoken, that his father encourages a process of "Mündigkeit" and integration into the symbolic. [...] The books shape Elias's subjectivity within a very specific cultural heritage they present to Elias a language with which he can interpret the world and appear to offer a language with which he can form his own opinions. [...] for Elias the fact of his father listening to his opinion is very important, and he sees it as being given a special responsibility — he is the one to be listened to, rather than the one doing the listening; [...] Being given this opportunity

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>583</sup> Ibid., p. 41

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>584</sup> Ibid.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>585</sup> Ibid., p. 42.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>586</sup> Ibid., p. 39.

to use his own reason, Elias senses that he must "dare to be wise" and develop his own "Mündigkeit." This effect of developing "Mündigkeit," engendered by the conversations with his father, is heightened by the fact that his father requests that he talk to him about the books in English<sup>587</sup>

In this case, the father offers Canetti what he himself will recognise as the founding substance of his identity: the magic and virtue of the written word: «It would be easy to show that almost everything that I consisted of later on was already in these books, which I read for my father in the seventh year of my life»<sup>588</sup>. In the mind of the young Canetti, literature and life are united, the word "freedom" will always be traced back to Wilhelm Tell, just as the word "power", the most atrocious of all, will be embodied in the figure of Napoleon, the protagonist of the last book that his father gives to Elias and whose reading is cut short by his untimely death: «I had little experience with power. My first notion of it stemmed from this book, and I have never been able to hear Napoleon's name without connecting it to my father's sudden death. Of all of Napoleon's murders, the greatest and most dreadful was of my father»<sup>589</sup>. The happy hours of discussion and debate about reading and writing are abruptly cut short, but the paternal lesson lives on in the writer, so much so that themes like mass, freedom, and power become central concepts in Canetti's entire poetics. On 8 October 1911, at the outbreak of war in the Balkans, his father Jacques dies suddenly, a coincidence that makes the war for Canetti «the most personal thing that could happen to [him]»<sup>590</sup>. Private memory and public history, time and space are inexorably intertwined, punctuated by Canetti's mother's cry that

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>587</sup> Helen O' Sullivan, art. cit., p. 135.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>588</sup> Ibid., p. 40.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>589</sup> Ibid., p. 41.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>590</sup> Ibid., p. 59.

embodies the vehicle for processing a history at once familiar and collective<sup>591</sup>:

Mother leaned way out, saw me standing at the tree with Alan, and yelled: "My son, you're playing, and your father is dead! You're playing, you're playing, and your father is dead! Your father is dead! You're

<sup>591</sup> The connection between private and historical trauma is another of the elements that Brugnolo lists as characteristic of the twentieth-century récit d'enfance: «Intanto per cominciare, l'episodio traumatico produce una scissione interna al soggetto tra un passato pretraumatico fuori dalla storia (che da allora si eternizza e assolutizza), e un presente-futuro tutto e solo storico. C'è perciò una omologia tra le fasi pre e postraumatiche individuali e quelle collettive. Secondo questo schema, direi che ogni passaggio storico traumatico tende a produrre una fioritura di ricordi d'infanzia che assolutizzano l'epoca che precede il passaggio traumatico che è avvenu- to sia sul piano storico che su quello individuale. Molti ricordi d'infanzia moderni sono di fatto testimonianze di com'era la vita prima che il mondo si modernizzasse e colui che ricorda divenisse adulto e ne entrasse a fare parte. Come ha dimostrato Orlando ciò è tipico dei ricordi d'infanzia letterari almeno da Chateaubriand in poi, a partire cioè da quel grande trauma storico che fu la Rivoluzione francese, che da allora in poi si costituì come modello per tanti altri passaggi storici traumatici; come ha scritto Sergio Zatti alcuni traumi epocali enfatizzano la funzione testimoniale della memoria e radicalizzano le cesure anche nella percezione delle storie individuali» [To begin with, the traumatic episode produces an internal split in the subject between a pre-traumatic past outside of history (which then becomes eternalised and absolutized), and a present-future that is all and only historical. There is therefore a homology between individual and collective pre- and posttraumatic phases. According to this scheme, I would say that every traumatic historical passage tends to produce a flowering of childhood memories that absolutize the era preceding the traumatic passage that occurred both historically and individually. Many modern childhood memories are in fact evidence of what life was like before the world modernised and the person who remembers became an adult and became part of it. As Orlando has shown, this is typical of literary childhood memories at least from Chateaubriand onwards, that is to say, from that great historical trauma that was the French Revolution, which from then on constituted a model for many other traumatic historical passages; as Sergio Zatti has written, some historical traumas emphasise the testimonial function of memory and radicalise the caesuras even in the perception of individual histories] Stefano Brugnolo, op. cit., p. 360.

playing, your father is dead!" She yelled it out into the street, she kept yelling louder and louder, they yanked her back into the room by force, she resisted, I heard her shouting after I no longer saw her, I heard her shouting for a long time. Her shouts pushed Father's death into me, and it has never left me since<sup>592</sup>

The mother's cry of mourning remains an indelible imprint of experience, an eternalised detail consigned forever to the memory of the narrator. The death of the father is also one of the first signs of the main theme that runs through the entire narrative, namely the magical power of language.

This early tragic childhood experience alerts Canetti to the mystical quality of words, to the power of language. It comes in the form of a curse from a father to a son: *la maldicion del padre* (the curse of the father). Canetti's father, a romantic and intellectual soul, was a regular at the Burgtheater in Vienna during his student years and had cultivated a desire to become an actor, an aspiration crushed by his uncompromising father, who forced him to work in his company. When Elias was six years old, his parents decided to leave the oppressive dominance of the grandfather's home and business and join the business of his mother's side of the family in Manchester. The grandfather was outraged at their decision and made every effort to stop their plans. When all his attempts failed and prior to their departure, the grandfather cursed his son in the presence of a horrified family. Canetti recalls that he heard them speaking about it: «Nothing, they said, was more dreadful than a father cursing his son»<sup>593</sup>. What made this childhood experience especially horrible and powerful was that Canetti's

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>592</sup> Ibid., p. 56.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>593</sup> Ibid., p. 33.

father died very unexpectedly a year later. Both the young boy and the grandfather attributed the death to the curse. As noted by Falk, the seven-year-old boy, then and later, perceived the death as an example of the power of words, another subject he would study in all its variations and manifestations throughout his life<sup>594</sup>. When his father dies, the family idyll breaks up, but for Canetti, «a sublime period [...] commenced»<sup>595</sup>, namely that of his "second birth" in the German language.

## 4.4. Maternal figures

As Canetti states, German language was for him: «a belated mother tongue, implanted in true pain»<sup>596</sup>. In Canetti's story, the German definition of "Muttersprache" takes on a threefold significance: on the one hand, it designates the vernacular language, the natural idiom in which the author thinks and recognises himself in the present of writing<sup>597</sup>, on the other hand

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>594</sup> Thomas Falk, *Elias Canetti*, New York, Twayne Publishers, 1993, p. 8.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>595</sup> Elias Canetti, op. cit., p. 70.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>596</sup> Ibid.

during which he was exposed to many different languages: «All events of those first few years were in Ladino or Bulgarian. It wasn't until much later that most of them were rendered into German within me. [...] Everything else, that is, most things, and especially anything Bulgarian, like the fairy tales, I carry around in German. I cannot say exactly how this happened. I don't know at what point in time, on what occasion, this or that translated itself. I never probed into the matter; perhaps I was afraid to destroy my most precious memories with a methodical examination based on rigorous principles. I can say only one thing with certainty: The events of those years are present to my mind in all their strength and freshness (I've fed on them for over sixty years), but the vast majority are tied to words that I did not know at that time» Elias Canetti, op. cit., p. 10. Apparently, the Bulgarian of childhood is transformed into German in adulthood. The translation, however, is not made by Canetti; rather, it seems that at some point it was the experiences themselves that translated, transposing spontaneously. For an interesting insight

it defines German as Canetti's "paper language"<sup>598</sup>, namely the medium of his writing, finally, it refers to the mother tongue in a practical sense, the idiom with which Elias Canetti's mother communicated with her husband, the "Geheimsprache" (secret language) of the sentimental relationship between the two.

Canetti's encounter with German begins at the age of six with a non-understanding experience «my life had begun with Kanniverstan's experience, when my parents spoke privately in a language I didn't know»<sup>599</sup> this experience is described through a mixed feeling of mystery and fascination: «They were very much in love at that time and had their own language, which I didn't understand; they spoke German, the language of their happy schooldays in Vienna»<sup>600</sup>. Canetti's parents had fallen in love, both theatre lovers, attending the *Burgtheater* in Vienna: «[...] the two young people had fed their love incessantly with German conversations, and one can imagine how many loving couples of the stage played their part here»<sup>601</sup>. Elias, driven by an insatiable childish curiosity and a desire to be included in his parents' relationship, therefore tries to listen in secret to their

into the fate of the Bulgarian language in Canetti and the concept of mother tongue see: Daniel Heller-Roazen, op. cit.

This refers to the definition coined by Deleuze and Guattari and concerning Kafka's literary German and the linguistic deterritorialisation implemented by the author, a characteristic mark of "minor literature". For more on these concepts, similarly attributable to Elias Canetti, see: Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Kafka. Toward a Minor Literature*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis and London, 1986.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>599</sup> Elias Canetti, op. cit., p. 231. The term is taken by Canetti from Hebel's *Schatzkästlein*, which means "I do not understand" in Dutch. For more on the origin of this expression in Hebel and its use by Canetti, see Kata Gellen, art. cit., pp. 31-32.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>600</sup> Elias Canetti, op. cit., p. 23.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>601</sup> Ibid., p. 23.

speeches, convinced that some topics can only be attributed to the sound of the German language:

So I had good reason to feel excluded when my parents began their conversations. They became very lively and merry, and I associated this transformation, which I noted keenly, with the sound of the German language I would listen with utter intensity and then ask them what this or that meant. They laughed, saying it was too early for me, those were things I would understand only later. It was already a great deal for them to give in on the word "Vienna," the only one they revealed to me. I believed they were talking about wondrous things that could be spoken of only in that language<sup>602</sup>

The narrator depicts the relationship between husband and wife as a magical discourse that is only temporarily interrupted by the demands of the real world. As Gellen notes: «These perceptions of mood and emotion in the face of a foreign tongue represent an encounter with pure voice. The child only has access to the language as *Klang* (sound), perceiving the material of spoken language alone. This sound inspires a sense of irreducibility and necessity of a particular language, which implies the specificity of voice» for the child, who at this point has no word of German, the sound and intonation of the ongoing parental babble is so fascinating that he believes German language is magic. Rather than questioning the meaning of the words, Elias believes that the uniqueness of the German language lies in its sound, and that it is only through the reproduction of that sound that the

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>602</sup> Ibid., p. 24.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>603</sup> Kata Gellen, art. cit., p. 27. Thus, the devotion to the German language as "magische Laute" begins as the same kind of attraction to language as pure sound that Canetti experienced in Marrakesh.

child can express the magical contents that he perceives. If for the parents, the use of German makes it the condition of a private interaction, «for the inquisitive child, however, it represents an opportunity to invent an altogether different way of listening to language»<sup>604</sup>. Excluded from his parents' secret speeches, but overcome by fascination, Elias begins to repeat the sounds he has heard despite not knowing their meaning:

After begging and begging to no avail, I ran away angrily into another room, which was seldom used, and I repeated to myself the sentences I had heard from them, in their precise intonation, like magic formulas; I practiced them often to myself, and as soon as I was alone, I reeled off all the sentences or individual words I had practiced reeled them off so rapidly that no one could possibly have understood me. But I made sure never to ler my parents notice, responding to their secrecy with my own<sup>605</sup>

As Gellen rightly notes, the child is not able to approach German as a system of signs that communicate meanings, that's why he treats his parents' speech like a series of magic spells consisting of sounds that must be internalized and reproduced. Hovever, «his self-taught German does not constitute a genuine *Lernen* (learning), but a somewhat degraded *Einlernen* (rote learning), which produces acoustic "copies" of language»<sup>606</sup>. This first linguistic experience based exclusively on sound, leads him to develop another secret language, one private dialogue to counteract his parent's secret speeches:

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>604</sup> Kata Gellen, art. cit., p. 27.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>605</sup> Elias Canetti, op. cit., p. 24.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>606</sup> Kata Gellen, art. cit., p. 28.

I found out that my father had a name for my mother which he used only when they spoke German. Her name was Mathilde, and he called her Mädi. Once, when I was in the garden, I concealed my voice as well as I could, and called loudly into the house: "Mädi! Mädi!" That was how my father called to her from the courtyard whenever he came home. Then I dashed off around the house and appeared only after a while with an innocent mien. My mother stood there perplexed and asked me whether I had seen Father. It was a triumph for me that she had mistaken my voice for his, and I had the strength to keep my secret, while she told him about the incomprehensible event as soon as he came home<sup>607</sup>

According to Anne Fuchs, the first scene of non-understanging of the spoken German between the parents, revolves around the transference of desire onto language and leads to a libidization of the non-semantic quality of spoken German, since: «Canetti rewrites the Oedipal drama here in that the passage transposes the child's anger at being excluded from the parent's love for each other into his sense of exclusion from the code of this love»<sup>608</sup>. The language takes on an erotic quality as pure sound without meaning, which the child interprets as "magic". By imitating his father's intonation, «the son symbolically announces that one day he will usurp the paternal place by producing the same magical formulas»<sup>609</sup>. In those early years, the sense of marginalisation felt by the narrator flows into a deep resentment towards his mother: «I cannot explain why I didn't really hold it against my father. I did nurture a deep resentment toward my mother, and it vanished only years later, after his death, when she herself began teaching me

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>607</sup> Elias Canetti, op. cit., p. 24.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>608</sup> Anne Fuchs, art. cit., p. 49.

<sup>609</sup> Ibid.

German»<sup>610</sup>. After the father's death, the family moves to Vienna in 1913. Determined to enrol her son in school, Elias' mother plays a decisive role in the transfert operation that conditions her life and that of her son for years to follow.

In the beginning we see that mother and son express symbiotic unity through physical proximity; Elias sleeps in her bed and comforts her by putting his arm around her at night. In this way he regains pre-Oedipal closeness to his mother while simultaneously fulfilling his father's role. This, according to Sokel's reading, can represent the fulfillment of an «oedipal utopia»<sup>611</sup>, for two main reasons: «first, because after the sudden death of his father, Canetti at age seven became his father's successor as companion, partner in conversation, and even adviser of his mother, and second, because he could succeed his father in his mother's life without antecedent rivalry with him»<sup>612</sup>. This interpretation is further developed by Helen O' Sullivan, who points out:

In a Lacanian interpretation, the death of his father presents an opportunity for Elias to return to symbiotic unity with his mother, and/or an opportunity to usurp his father's position of intimacy with his mother. A regression to a prelinguistic physical state is made possible, yet this does not remove the fact that both mother and son require someone to fulfil the roles previously held by the father<sup>613</sup>

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>610</sup> Elias Canetti, op. cit. p. 24.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>611</sup> Walter H. Sokel, «The Love Affair with the Mother Tongue: On the Relation Between Autobiography and Novel in Elias Canetti», *The Germanic Review: Literature, Culture, Theory*, vol. 78, n. 1, 2003, pp. 39-48, p. 39.

<sup>612</sup> Ibid.

<sup>613</sup> Helen O' Sullivan, art. cit., p. 137.

Canetti's mother begins to have an increasingly strong influence on her son, triggering a deep emotional dependency on him and projecting the image of his father onto him. This form of closeness does not suffice longterm. To stand in for his father, Canetti has to learn the secret language spoken by his parents.

She herself had a profound need to use German with me, it was the language of her intimacy. The dreadful cut into her life, when, at twenty-seven, she lost my father, was expressed most sensitively for her in the fact that their loving conversations in German were stopped. Her true marriage had taken place in that language. She didn't know what to do, she felt lost without him, and tried as fast as possible to put me in his place<sup>614</sup>

In the few short weeks in Lausanne preceding their impending move to Vienna, Canetti's mother starts teaching him German. If the relationship with his father is based on dialogue and approval, the relationship with his mother hinges on scorn and submission. The mother-teacher expects the child to live up to the paternal *imago* and, almost as if in a palimpsest, begins to carve out its contours, grafting the German language onto Elias in the true sense of the word, only through the sound of her voice. The language is thus not read or written, but heard, learnt, and conveyed within a rigidly oral articulatory regime in which the mother's voice outlines the knowledge that the child passively absorbs and attempts to reproduce:

We sat at the big table in the dining room, [...] She sat around the corner to my left and held the textbook in such a way that I couldn't look in. She always kept it far from me. "You don need it," she said, "you can't understand it yet

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>614</sup> Elias Canetti, op. cit., p. 70.

anyway." But despite this explanation, I felt she was withholding the book like a secret. She read a German sentence to me and had me repeat it. Disliking my accent, she made me repeat the sentence several times, until it struck her as tolerable. But this didn't occur often, for she derided me for my accent, and since I couldn't stand her derision for anything in the world, I made an effort and soon pronounced the sentence correctly. Only then did she tell me what the sentence meant in English. But this she never repeated, I had to note it instantly and for all time. Then she quickly went on to the next sentence and followed the same procedure; as soon as I pronounced it correctly, she translated it, eyed me imperiously to make me note it, and was already on the next sentence. I don't know how many sentences she expected to drill me in the first time; let us conservatively say a few; I fear it was many. She let me go saying: "Repeat it all to yourself. You must not forget a single sentence. Not a single one. Tomorrow, we shall continue." She kept the book, and I was left to myself, perplexed<sup>615</sup>

The learning process is acousmatic, the child learns to speak without meaning, parroting abstract words, and learning the language in a way that confirms his mother's position of authority over him. His mother is «cruel and she liked doing it»<sup>616</sup>. The mother compels him «to achieve something beyond the strength of any child», determining the «deeper nature»<sup>617</sup> of Elias' German. Terrified to the core by his mother's reproaches and insults, the child learns German in just three months. In this way, the father tongue

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>615</sup> Elias Canetti, op. cit., p. 68.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>616</sup> Ibid., p. 58.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>617</sup> Ibid., p. 70.

is slowly replaced by a new profoundly ambivalent mother tongue. The pain of his "second birth" into the German language, binds Canetti both to the language and to his mother: «I was reborn under my mother's influence to the German language, and the spasm of that birth produced the passion tying me to both, the language and my mother. Without these two, basically one and the same, the further course of my life would have been senseless and incomprehensible»<sup>618</sup>. Henceforth his life is given meaning through both German language and his attachment to his mother, both connotated through love, «and what a love it was!»<sup>619</sup>. What could have been an escape from the symbolic order, becomes a painful entrace in the symbolic itself, since this new identity is painfully given to the youg Canetti from his mother<sup>620</sup>. As O'Sullivan rightly notes: «The father tongue is being replaced by the mother tongue; but this is the not the language of dialogue that he experienced with his father, rather it is a language which drills itself into him and forces the creation of a new identity. The mother plays a painful game as she constructs and deconstructs Elias's sense of himself»621. The description of

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>618</sup> Ibid., p. 74.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>619</sup> Elias Canetti, op. cit., p. 70.

<sup>620</sup> As Anne Fuchs explains: «Before we are speaking subjects in a world of coherent objects, we all inhabit a space without proper boundaries and borders. Kristeva refers to this space as the chora [...] Eventually, the young child begins to demarcate boundaries between self and mother. It needs a third party, the father or the "paternal metaphor," to pursue this struggle to demarcate and divide, and to ensure that the subject will find its place in the symbolic order. The paternal metaphor enables the struggling "not-yet-I" to make the transition and to give up the "good maternal object" in favor of finding its place within the symbolic order. [...] According to psychoanalytic theory, the acquisition of language implies a breaking away from the mirror identifications that bind mother and child. Canetti's autobiography, however, reverses this process through the story of his dramatic rebirth in German. Instead of freeing the child from the devouring mother, the German language locks him even further into a narcissistic dependence that will eventually result in a battle for life and death» Anne Fuchs, art. cit., p. 50.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>621</sup> Helen O'Sullivan, art. cit., p. 136.

learning German evokes a very close connection not only between love and fear, but above all between obedience and identity:

Remember that in the previous episode the son perceived the parental love talk as some magical babble that derived its desirability from the purity of the sound pattern. Forcing these sounds down his throat, the mother commits a brutal act that violates the boundaries between self and mother to such an extent that it is doubtful that the violated boy can ever occupy a space of his own. From now on mother and son are not only inextricably linked, but the mother will, as a kind of ventriloquist, speak through her son. We can see how the introjection of the mother tongue leads to a fateful maternalization of the German language: because the son has actually internalized the mother's tongue, the German language has, to a large extent, lost its potential to emancipate this struggling self. Furthermore, the brutal implantation of what is literally a mother tongue results in a symbolic matrix that both desymbolizes language and fictionalizes desire<sup>622</sup>

The period of suffering eventually finishes, thanks to Canetti's nanny's cunning intervention. When she notices his terror, she devises a plan to save him from the peculiar teaching method that relies solely on an aural technique. Canetti's nanny persuades the mother to give him a grammar book:

The resolution of the teaching episode suggests that the world of books can provide a safe haven from the violence of the maternal grip. Reading would thus reinstate

<sup>622</sup> Anne Fuchs, art. cit., p. 50.

the symbolic order and achieve the eventual repression of the maternal. However, since the world of literature has already been associated with the eroticized love babble of the parents, this solution is doomed to failure. This is borne out by the ensuing "Leseabende" – evenings spent reading – where the boundaries between loving and reading are constantly blurred, and the mother confuses son and husband. Instead of opening up a space for the third other, reading reinforces the maternal hold<sup>623</sup>

Canetti states: «My mother had trapped me in a dreadful hypnosis, and she was the only one who could release me»<sup>624</sup>. The painful learning of German is only the beginning of a long process of powerful narcissistic projections that begin to involve the literary sphere. Elias and his mother spend evening reading and discussing literature, she gives him books to read and asks for his opinions on them. Hearing Elias give his views revives his mother's memories of long evenings spent with his father discussing theatre.

The more intelligently I responded and the more I had to say, the more powerfully her old experiences surfaced in her. As soon as she began talking about one of those old enthusiasms, which had become the inmost substance of her life, I knew that it would go on for a long time; it was no longer important now for me to go to bed, she herself could no more part from me than I from her, she spoke to me as an adult<sup>625</sup>

<sup>623</sup> Ibid.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>624</sup> Elias Canetti, op. cit., p. 69.

<sup>625</sup> Elias Canetti, op. cit., p. 83.

According to Fuchs, when literature enters the scene in the relationship between the two, there is a real fictionalisation of desire: «Instead of introducing the space for the third other, literature is unwittingly turned into a narcissistic fetish that feeds into projections of grandeur and the eroticization of language. The price for this undisturbed unity between mother and son is the derealization, or vice versa, the fictionalization of sexual desire. As a result of this configuration, literature becomes the only permitted locus of desire»<sup>626</sup>. The conversations in the evenings with his mother forge Canetti's "self" in a game of identity in which there are no defined boundaries between fiction and reality. Those evening spent reading are what Elias will recognise as the substance of which he himself is made:

For the most incomparably important, the most exciting and special events of this period were my evening readings with my mother and the conversations about everything we read. I cannot render these conversations in detail anymore, for a good portion of me consists of them. If there is an intellectual substance that one receives at an early age, to which one refers constantly, which one never escapes, then it was this. I was filled with blind trust for my mother, the characters the quizzed me about have become so much a part of my world that I can no longer take them apart. I am able to follow all later influences in every detail. But those characters form a dense and indivisible unity. Since that time, that is, since I was ten, it has been something of a dogma for me that I consist of many people whom I am not at all aware of. I believe that they determine what attracts or repels me in

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<sup>626</sup> Anne Fuchs, art cit., p. 52.

the people I meet. They were the bread and salt of my early years They are the true, the hidden life of my intellect<sup>627</sup>

This explicit statement of the multiplicity of personal identity, which is echoed elsewhere in the text, demonstrates that Canetti's self-sufficiency is dependent on what he will later call his capacity for metamorphosis.

Although in these early scenes of intellectual chemistry between mother and son Canetti describes his mother as a woman of «universal interests»<sup>628</sup> a passionate reader whose «mind was penetrating»<sup>629</sup> and a woman whose «knowledge of human nature had been schooled in the great works of world literature as well as in the experiences of her own life»<sup>630</sup>, the idealised description of this mother-teacher cracks more and more. Canetti describes violent conversations about books and readings, about the writers they agreed to revere. They had to admire the same writers, every new discovery created a tense moment marked by the shadow of betrayal.

In reading literature and becoming obsessed with fictional characters, Elias grows more and more blinded to the world outside the texts he reads, so that he comes to interpret what he sees in his environment through literature, rather than giving his own eyes primacy of interpretation. In this case it is the written word which disturbs the development of an individual identity.

His true development begins when he defies the authority of his mother's voice and learns a new way of listening. His mother despises the Swiss German phrases she hears her son using after the family relocates to Switzerland. They do not meet the *Burgtheater* standards that she has

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>627</sup> Elias Canetti, op. cit., p. 89.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>628</sup> Ibid., p. 111.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>629</sup> Ibid., p. 6.

<sup>630</sup> Ibid.

instilled in him. Only languages with their own literature's history are acceptable to his mother. Elias begins secretly practising Zurich German:

I practiced Zurich German for myself alone, against my mother's will, concealing from her the progress I was making. That, so far as language went, was my first independent move from her, and although still subjugated to her in all opinions and influences, I began feeling like a "man" in this one thing<sup>631</sup>

The voices of others, start being his true interest. Visiting Elias in Zurich, his mother mercilessly condemns what had been the shared content of their lives, in what appeares to be a complete reversal of the values she had taught him. Canetti's painful birth into German, through his mother, is to be betrayed by his mother's equally renunciation of everything she stood for. After Elias visited a valley and cannot stop talking about hearing people in a village speaking Old High German, his mother engages in a furious attack:

<sup>631</sup> Elias Canetti, op. cit., p. 138.

<sup>632 «</sup>The first sentence I heard sounded a thousand years old. A very small, enterprising boy took a few paces towards us, but an old woman, who wanted to keep him away from us, pulled him back, and the two words she used sounded so lovely that I couldn't believe my ears. "Chuom, Buobilu!" (Come, boy) she said. What vowels those were! Instead of Büebli, which I was accustomed to hearing for "little boy," she said Busbils, a rich dark structure of, and i, I recalled the Old High German verses we read at school. I knew how close the Swiss German dialects were to Middle High German, but I hadn't expected anything sounding like Old High German, and I regarded it as my discovery. It bulked all the more powerfully in my mind, being the only thing that I heard. The people were taciturn and seemed to avoid us. Throughout our entire hike, we didn't get into a single conversation. We saw the old wooden houses, the women in black, the flowering pot plants in front of the windows, the meadows I pricked up my ears for further sentences, all the people were mute, it may have been sheer chance, but "Chuom Buobilu" was

ever since you visited Lötschen Valley, your mind's been degenerating. You heard two words, and what were those words? "Come, little boy," or however they pronounce it there [...] You came back from your excursion and spoke about Old High German for days on end. Old High German! Today! They may not even have enough to eat, but why should you care! You hear two words, you think they're Old High German because they remind you of something you read. That gets you more excited than what you see with your own eyes. [...] You're nothing as yet and you think you're everything you know from books or pictures. I should never have led you to books<sup>633</sup>

Both the effect of the Great War, of which she had been an ardent opponent, and her helplessness in doing anything about it, and the news reports of the misery in Germany and Austria, make Canetti's mother change her faith. She is now opposed to the adoration of literature, art, and aesthetic-intellectual culture. In her point of view, Elias's interests are nothing but a frivolous distraction, an anesthetic to the "real world". Above all, she accuses him of being supported by her money. After an argument on this topic, an unrestrained reaction is trigerred in Elias:

I grabbed a huge, almost new pad of writing paper and covered page after page with gigantic capital letters: "MONEY, MONEY AND MONEY AGAIN." The same words, line after line, until the page was full. Then I tore it off and began the next page with "MONEY, MONEY, AND MONEY AGAIN." [...] I couldn't stop writing. The pad had

the only piece of language to stay in my ears from the valley» Elias Canetti, op. cit., pp. 251-252.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>633</sup> Ibid., p. 265.

a hundred sheets; I covered each single page with my  $writing^{634}$ 

What is striking about this episode is not so much the vehemence of Elias' counterattack but the medium through which it is carried out. This scene has been interpreted in different ways: for Waltraut Wiethölter this frantic writing act demonstrates the great effort of the writer to liberate his self from the maternal hold by claiming writing as an activity that belongs to the paternal sphere<sup>635</sup>. Fuchs, who mainly agrees with Wiethölter, adds that: «By choosing the written word and thus evoking the world of writing that was at the heart of the symbiotic relationship between mother and son, he repudiates the notion that his mother and his language are one and the same»<sup>636</sup>. If, according to Wiethölter, Canetti ultimately loses this battle for life and death because his writing remains wedded to the maternal hold, I do agree with Fuchs' reading:

What appears to be a traditionally closed narrative is in fact a story about the self's struggle to salvage a space of its own. The third part of the autobiography indicates the possibility of such a space by prioritizing the voice over all writing. Strange as this may sound – after all Canetti was a writer – Canetti's poetics favors the human voice for its capacity to create a space for reciprocity between self and other. This is most evident in his relationship with Veza and, in *Das Augenspiel*, his conversations with Dr. Sonne<sup>637</sup>

<sup>634</sup> Elias Canetti, op. cit., pp. 399-400.

<sup>635</sup> See: Waltraud Wiethölter, art. cit.

<sup>636</sup> Anne Fuchs, art. cit., p. 53.

<sup>637</sup> Ibid.

It is true that the key element of Canetti's existence is his passion for the language and for the mother, which were originally the same thing. Only later the love of language – the very love his mother had instilled in him – clashes with the love for the mother, turning into hatred. As the mother's reaction to the reading of Canetti's first novel demonstrates<sup>638</sup>, it is also true that, since language is a «veritable battlefield»<sup>639</sup> of Canetti's search for individuality, the son's decision to become a writer does not resolve the deadly battle against and for the mother. Conceived as a site of liberation from the maternal grip, the son's writing only traps him further in a classic twofold dilemma in which each work expresses the son's rebellion and obedience at the same time.

Canetti's struggle for individuality involves «the mapping of a utopian space that is not defined by ownership of the mother, the primary other»<sup>640</sup>. This space, I believe, is the space of listening, the search for new

<sup>638 «</sup>now, she said, she understood the struggle that I had waged for my freedom, now she acknowledged my right to this freedom, despite the great unhappiness that this struggle had brought upon her. The book, which she had read, was flesh of her flesh she said, she recognized herself in me, she had always viewed people the way I depicted them, that was exactly how she would have wanted to write herself. [...] I had become what she had most wanted me to be» Elias Canetti, op. cit., p. 60. Particularly interesting is Anne Fuch's interpretation: «The curious formulation that the book and not the son is flesh of her flesh reveals her claim that she has actually authored both the son and his writing. It is relevant to note here that the son uses the subjunctive when relaying what amounts to a classic projection that she would have liked to write exactly like that. The subjunctive opens up a certain distance from a claim that reflects the mother's inability to distinguish between self and writing. She is clearly unable to accept any kind of symbolic agency and the notion of representation. As a result of this disavowal of the symbolic, the mother views writing as "flesh of her flesh," in other words as a domain that is completely non-transcendental» Anne Fuchs art. cit., p. 54.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>639</sup> Ibid., p. 46.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>640</sup> Anne Fuchs, art.cit., p. 46.

experiences of *Kanniverstan* and non-understandig, e.g., Canetti's utopian training to become an *Earwitness*.

In the autobiographical trilogy, this process involves the transition from the stifling dyadic relationship with his mother toward the social sphere. This process develops in the second part of the autobiography through the experiences he calls "the school of hearing" and, ultimately his idealization of the "pure voice" with reference to the figure of Dr. Sonne. This path, as we saw, leads him to the experiences he describes in *The Voices of Marrakesch*. As Anne Fuchs states:

Although *Die Stimmen von Marrakesch* is an expression of Canetti's poetics of otherness, the three-part autobiography traces the genesis of his poetics back to the deadly battle between mother and son. In an ironic twist Canetti rewrites the founding myth of the autobiography by envisaging a voice without a tongue. However, the question that remains is to what extent this conception of a disembodied voice can liberate the son. Clearly, the utopian idea of the pure voice as an agent of another language that escapes the deadly power play of discourse can only be realized in and through poetic fiction<sup>641</sup>

Similarly to what we just analysed in Canetti's *Die gerettete Zunge*, also in Sarraute's *Enfance* «the mother-daughter dyad is central to the narrative»<sup>642</sup>. But, as we will soon see, Sarraute's narrative while «matrocentric, [is] resolutely antinostalgic»<sup>643</sup>. Several papers have been

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>641</sup> Anne Fuchs, art. cit., pp. 58-59.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>642</sup> Nelly Grossman Kupper, «Daughters who remeber. The Omnipresent Mother in Sarraute's *Enfance* and the Absent Mother in Modiano's *La Petite Bijou*», Orbis Litterarum, n. 76, 2011, pp. 171-193, p. 171.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>643</sup> Bella Brodzki, art. cit., p. 158.

written concerning the mother-daughter bond in *Enfance*, considering this relationship as one of the paths to understanding the narrative and, in some cases, its main origin<sup>644</sup>.

As we have already observed concerning Sarraute's first memory, the sudden reiteration in the present develops a «tropisme réactif»<sup>645</sup>: the prohibition imposed on her as a child resonates in the narrator's memory, taking on a constricting dimension that triggers an inner, instinctive impulse through which she asserts her claim to autonomy immediately evoked by the similarity of her past and present intimate reactions. A similar process occurs in the second fragment, the first in which the protagonist's mother appears. Her appearance, however, occurs *in absentia*, i.e., through some words she has said to her daughter. Also in this scene, the use of verbal tenses allows us to identify a parallelism between the chewing imposed by the mother on Natacha and the obstinate repetition of the command in the present:

In that hotel... or in another Swiss hotel of the same type, where my father is once again spending his holidays with me, I am sitting at a table in a room lit by wide bay windows through which you can see lawns, trees... It's the

les souvenirs, les pieces du puzzle ne sont pas simplement présentés selon l'ordre des événements ou celui de la remémoration; ils sont arranges par rapport à un événement capital, l'absence de la mère» [This childhood novel is a mythic story, and the memories, the puzzle pieces, are not simply presented in the order of events or remembrance; they are arranged in relation to a major event, the mother's absence] Bruno Vercier «(Nouveau) Roman et Autobiographie: Enfance de Nathalie Sarraute», *French Literature Series*, vol. 12, 1995, pp. 45-51, p. 166; See also, Monique Gosselin, op. cit., pp. 115-142; Yolanda Astarita Patterson, «Childhood Memories: Nathalie Sarraute's *Enfance* and Simone de Beauvoir's *Mémoires d'une jeune fille rangée*», *Simone de Beauvoir Studies*, vol. 4, n.1, 1987, pp. 151-157.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>645</sup> Monique Gosselin, op. cit., p. 45.

children's dining room, where they have their meals under the supervision of their governesses, their maids.

They are sitting in a group as far away from me as possible, at the other end of the long table... the faces of some of them are grotesquely deformed by an enormous, swollen cheek... I hear guffaws, I see the amused glances they secretly dart at me, I can't quite hear, but I can guess what the adults are whispering to them: "Come on, eat up, stop that idiotic game, don't look at that child, you mustn't imitate her, she's an insufferable child, a crazy child, a fanatical child..."

- You already knew those words...
- My goodness, yes... I'd heard them often enough... But none of those vaguely terrifying, degrading words, no attempt at persuasion, no entreaty could incite me to open my mouth to accept the bit of food being impatiently waved around on the end of a fork, there, just outside my clenched lips... When I finally unclench them to admit this morsel, I immediately push it into my already full, swollen, taut cheek... a larder in which it will have to wait its turn to pass through my teeth and be masticated there until it has be come as liquid as soup... 646

In this scene Sarraute plays with focalisation: in the foreground, some «temps forts»<sup>647</sup> of everyday but meaningful scenes – those relating to the interiority of the little girl and the sub-conversation – emerge, while in

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>646</sup> Nathalie Sarraute, op. cit., p. 8.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>647</sup> Monique Gosselin, op. cit., p. 64.

the background, with the use of come «temps faibles»<sup>648</sup>, the inquisitive voice intervenes unmasking the deception and emphasising that even if the sensations are of the past, the words to describe them belong to the present. The shadow of a doubt cast by the double quickly vanishes to leave room – in the present – for the thoughts of the child Natacha. According to Lejeune, in this case: «These are a kind of enunciative "zoom" effect. They give the text its rhythm, and allow the present to accompany the past, to elucidate its meaning without losing its presence...»<sup>649</sup>. The use of the present tense in the second memory is not an indication of the uniqueness of the scene, nor a sign of the concomitance with the act of writing, but, the signal of «a struggle between the atemporality of the inner depths and the threat of forgetting»<sup>650</sup>. In analysing the second fragment, Lejeune describes a perspective «a recoulons», which «remonte des effets vers les causes»<sup>651</sup>: the reader perceives Natacha through the gaze the children have on her without understanding the cause of her discomfort. This «mystère narratif»<sup>652</sup> is soon revealed to be a «mystère psychologique»<sup>653</sup> that can be traced back to the original meaning of the formula «aussi liquide qu'une soupe». With the revelation of the origin of tropism, the temporal architecture of the fragment is further complicated:

"You heard what Doctor Kervilly said? You must chew your food until it has become as liquid as soup... Whatever you do, don't forget that when you're there,

<sup>648</sup> Ibid.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>649</sup> «Ce sont des sortes d'effets de "zoom" énonciatifs. Ils donnent au texte son rythme, et permettent au présent d'accompagner le passé, d'élucider son sens sans perdre sa présence…» Philippe Lejeune, *Les brouillons de soi*, op. cit., p. 289.

<sup>650 «</sup>une lutte entre l'atemporalité des profondeurs et la menace de l'oubli» Ibid.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>651</sup> Ibid., p. 283.

<sup>652</sup> Ibid.

<sup>653</sup> Ibid.

without me, no one there will know, they'll forget, they won't bother, it will be up to you to bear it in mind, you must remember what I'm telling you... promise me you'll do that..." "Yes, I promise, Mama, don't worry, set your mind at rest, you can rely on me..." Yes, she can be quite sure of that, I shall replace her at my side, she won't leave me, it will be as if she were still there to preserve me from the dangers that the others here are not aware of, how could they be aware of them?<sup>654</sup>

We witness a layering of the narration, a kind of monologue in free direct speech integrated into the adult narrator's narrative and divided into several temporal planes: by giving the mother the floor in free direct speech, the narrator plunges us into a past even earlier than that of the recollection in Switzerland, an original past in which tropism was first experienced. As Lejeune notes: «As soon as this discourse is accessible, the narrative changes regime (it begins to mimic the child's reactions) and, above all, it abandons the retrograde movement. We have reached the bottom, the origin. We can start again in the direction of time, develop the consequences of this maternal speech, or rather of the way in which it was heard»<sup>655</sup>. When her mother, before the separation from her child, makes her promise that she will always chew her food until it is "as liquid as soup," the child sacralizes these words in her absence, enduring physical pain and social ostracism rather than betray the "precious" legacy. As Bella Brodzki notes:

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<sup>654</sup> Nathalie Sarraute, op. cit., p. 8.

<sup>655 «</sup>Dès qu'on accède à ce discours, le récit change de régime (il se met à mimer les réactions de l'enfant) et surtout il abandonne le mouvement rétrograde. On a touché le fond, l'origine. On peut repartir dans le sens du temps, développer les conséquences de cette parole maternelle, ou plutôt de la manière dont elle a été entendue» Philippe Lejeune, op. cit., p. 283.

It is not, however, from the world's intervention that this maternal legacy is in constant danger of betrayal: it is threatered from within. If Natasha perceives language as that which binds her to her mother in her mother's absence, then it comes as no great surprise that the child ritualizes words, especially such words as tragedy, happiness, and home to an obsessive degree, and that she cathects the literality of language, indeed its materiality<sup>656</sup>

The memory of the mother's words introduces two recurring themes in the narrative: abandonment and loneliness. Beginning with this scene, the drama that characterises the entire work sets in: the fear of being abandoned by the mother. However, the sacred and inviolable words also introduce a second element, namely Natacha's total idealisation of the mother figure. Natacha repeats to herself: «she is the only one who can know what's right for me, she's the only one who can distinguish what's good for me from what is bad»<sup>657</sup>. Natacha's mother, as well as her father, are beyond any suspicion<sup>658</sup>.

However, suspicion creeps between the pages and into the mind of the little girl. From this point of view, it is interesting to note how, in a scene set in the little girl's bedroom – very similar to the one in which the father was present – there is a drama unfolding, again a drama that is perceived from the pitch of the voice. The mother's tone of voice reading aloud, but in a flat, unexpressive tone, is a symptom of something deeper. In this particular fragment, the double intervenes, grafting suspicion in the narrator and giving rise to tropism:

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<sup>656</sup> Bella Brodzki, art. cit., p. 251.

<sup>657</sup> Nathalie Sarraute, Childhood, op. cit., p. 8.

 $<sup>^{658}</sup>$  «for me, my mother, just like my father, was always beyond suspicion» Nathalie Sarraute, op. cit., p. 61.

Mama beads to me in her deep voice, without putting in any expression... the words come our brisk and clear... ar moments I have the impression that she isn't giving much thought to what she is reading... when I tell her that I'm sleepy or that I'm tired, she shuts the book very quickly, I feel she's glad to stop...

- Did you really feel that at that moment?
- I think so, I perceived it, but I didn't judge her in any way... wasn't it natural that a children's book would not interest a grown-up who likes to read difficult books? It was only at the end, when I got up, when I was about to go down into the garden...
- This is the end of the "happy memories" which you had such scruples about... they conformed too closely co the model...
- Yes... it didn't take long for them to regain the privilege of conforming to nothing but themselves... Standing in my room, still not very steady on my feet, through the open door I heard Mama saying to I don't know whom: "When I think that I have stayed shut up here with Natasha all this time without anyone dreaming of taking my place with her." But what I felt at that moment had soon vanished...
  - Had sunk, perhaps, but...
- Probably... but in any case it had sunk deep enough for me not to see anything on the surface. One gesture, one affectionate word from Mama was enough, or even just seeing her, sitting in her armchair reading, raising her head, looking surprised when I go up and speak to her, she looks at me through her pince-nez, their lenses enlarging her bronze-

coloured eyes, they seem immense, full of naiveté, innocence, good nature...<sup>659</sup>

What is gradually perceived is the mother's selfishness towards her daughter, indeed, almost her insesitivity. However, the child is subjugated by the mother figure and, above all, by her voice. The mother has total power over language, as the narrator herself states: «No word, however powerfully uttered, has ever sunk into me with the same percussive force as some of hers»<sup>660</sup>. The more memories evoked by the narrator, the more the double insists on instilling suspicion in the narrative. The childhood scenes with her mother are never neutral, her words are never clear. Instead, the answers she gives her daughter are often platitudes, clichés and conventional responses:

- Once, [...] you remember...
- But that was what I felt a long time afterwards... you know very well that at that moment...
- Oh, even at the moment... and the proof is that those words remained in you forever, words heard that one and only time... that old saying...
- Mama and Kolya were pretending to be wrestling, they were enjoying themselves and I wanted to join in, I took Mama's side, I put my arms round her, as if to defend her, and she pushed me away gently... "Let go... husband and wife are on the same side." And I backed away<sup>661</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>659</sup> Ibid., pp. 30-31.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>660</sup> Ibid., p. 19.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>661</sup> Ibid., p. 63.

This scene in particular picks up on some of the aspects we explored in Canetti's case. Sarraute's mother is playing with her new husband. When Natacha tries to fit in between the two the mother tells her the cliché-phrase: "femme et mari sont un même parti" The third-party in the scene has no room. The physical sensation the child experiences is described through an acoustic metaphor: "...it was like the tinkle of a glass being gently tapped" Hidden behind her mother's platitude, the double unveils the sesation, and finally the narrator states: "I was a foreign body" 664.

The mother's words, which at the beginning of the narrative fascinate and captivate the child, turn out to be increasingly inauthentic. This happens especially when Natacha is away from her mother and receives her letters. Deprived of her voice and, therefore, of her body, her mother's words replace her presence and materialise her distance, suggesting the inadequacy of an affection that has become mere and empty words:

I take Mama's letters out of a painted wooden casket, they are strewn with affectionate words, she talks of "our love," "our separation" in them, it is obvious that we aren't separated for good, not forever... And is that what a tragedy is? My parents, who know better, would be amazed if they heard that word... Papa would be annoyed, angry... he hates these big words. And Mama would say: Yes, a tragedy when people love each other as we do... 665

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>662</sup> Nathalie Sarraute, *Enfance*, op. cit., p. 75.

<sup>663</sup> Natahlie Sarraute, *Childhood*, p. 63.

<sup>664</sup> Ibid.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>665</sup> Ibid., p. 106.

There is one scene in particular that will lead to a negative escalation of the relationship between mother and daughter and the emergence of what young Natacha calls the "ideas" that obsess her. Natacha and her mother are walking, when the little girl sees a doll and thinks it is beautiful. She stares at it for a long time, entranced by its beauty:

I suddenly feel something like embarassment, slight distress... it's as if somewhere inside me I have bumped into something, something has come and knocked into me... it takes shape, it acquires a form... a very precise form: "She is more beautiful than Mama" [...]<sup>666</sup>

Soon a sub-conversation starts. The power of those words which popped in her mind is to heavy, those words have to be shared.

Now that it is in me, there's no question of my hiding it from her, I can't distance myself from her to that extent, close myself up, enclose myself on my own with that, I can't be the only one to bear it, it belongs to her, to both of us... if I bottle it up in myself it will grow bigger, heavier, it will press harder and harder, I absolutely must let her see it, I'm going to show it to her... the way I show her a graze, a splinter, a bump... Look, Mama, look what I've got here, look what I've done to myself... "I think she's more beautiful than you"... and she will bend down, blow on it, pat it, come on now, it's nothing at all, just as she delicately extracts a thorn, just as she takes a coin out of her bag and presses it on the bump to stop it getting any bigger... "But of course, you big silly, of course, she's more beautiful than I am"... and it will stop

hurting, it will disappear, we shall go on our way quietly, hand-in-hand...<sup>667</sup>

In the sub-conversation the scene is easily resolved. The mother has the power to chase away the "ideas", she can easily push away the drama taking place in the child's head. But what takes place in the actual conversation is different:

But Mama lets go of my hand, or she holds it less tightly, she looks at me with her displeased expression and says: "A child who loves its mother thinks that no one is more beautiful than she." 668

The sentence annihilates the child, the mother's words become a burden: «I carried within me what she had deposited there... a well-wrapped parcel... It's only when we are home, when I am alone, that I will open it to see what it contains...»<sup>669</sup>. What weighs in the mother's response is the generalisation it underlies:

She had said: "A child who loves its mother thinks that no one is more beautiful than she." And it was these words that stood out, it was they that preoccupied me... A child. A. A. Yes, a child among all the others, a child like all the other children. A real child who possesses the feelings that all real children have, a child who loves its mother. What child doesn't love her! Where has that ever been known! Nowhere. It wouldn't be a child, it would be a monster. Or else, she wouldn't be a real mother, she would be a stepmother. Hence, a child, who is like children are, like they

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>667</sup> Ibid., p. 84.

<sup>668</sup> Ibid.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>669</sup> Ibid.

should be, loves its Mama. And then, it thinks her more beautiful than anyone else in the world. It is this fovelt has for her that makes it think her so beautiful... the most beautiful... And I, it's obvious, I don't love her, since I think the hairdresser's doll more beautiful<sup>670</sup>

The mother's reply is felt by Natacha as a threefold questioning: on the one hand, Natasha may not be a real "child"; on the other hand, this constatation leads to the suspicion that the mother may not be a real "mother"; and finally, the last lines raise doubts about the love between the daughter and the mother: does it really exist? These are all questions that ultimately constitute the entire narrative and are reflected in the multifaceted drama that plays out in the child's mind. However, it is the generalisation imposed by the mother, the non-recognition of subjectivity marked by the indeterminative article that makes the child Natacha wonder if she is like other children<sup>671</sup> and allows the "ideas" to take over. The "ideas" are thoughts or images that Natacha feels come from an unknown elsewhere: «somewhere outside me, in a place I don't know…»<sup>672</sup>.

Having suddenly appeared, the "ideas" undermine the mother figure by questioning her beauty or generosity, in a first and painful attempt to free the child from her domination. But, at the very moment she tries to share them, so as to render them harmless, instead of the hoped-for liberation Natacha feels overwhelmed by the weight of an unexpected sentence. Hence the child's sense of guilt and marginalisation, who, unable to share her feelings, will remain at the mercy of her inner suffering.

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>670</sup> Ibid., pp. 84-85.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>671</sup> A similar event already takes place at the very beginning of the book. See *Childhood*, op. cit., p. 22.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>672</sup> Ibid., p. 88.

Now that this idea has entrenched itself in me, it is not just a matter of willpower for me to dislodge it. I can force myself to uproot it, to put another idea in its place, but only for a time... it's still there, crouching in a corner, ready to get up at any moment, to push everything else out of its way, to occupy the whole space... It seems that trying to keep it down, to suppress it, only increases its growth. It is the proof, the sign of what I am: a child who doesn't love its mother. A child who bears the stigma of something that separates it, that outlaws it from other children... the light-hearted, carefree children I see laughing, shouting, chasing one another, swinging in the garden, in the square... and I am on my own. Alone with that something, which no one knows about and which no one, if told about it, would be able to believe<sup>673</sup>

What happens in the relationship between Natcha and her mother is that «The mother does not recognize or denies the existence of the daughter as a separate person, and the daughter herself then comes not to recognize, or to have difficulty recognizing, herself as a separate person»<sup>674</sup>. This kind of relationship leads to «confusion» and «suridetification»<sup>675</sup>. As Natacha herself states:

Something that used to be in me has gone, something that is in all the other children, the real children... those rapid, limpid, running waters, like mountain streams, torrents, they have turned into the stagnant, muddy, polluted waters of

<sup>673</sup> Ibid., p. 86.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>674</sup> Nancy Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering. Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender*, University of California Press, Berkley and Los Angeles, 1978, p. 103.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>675</sup> Ibid., p. 103.

ponds... the waters that attract mosquitoes. You don't need to tell me again that I wasn't capable of conjuring up these images... what is certain is that they convey the exact sensation produced in me by my pitiable state<sup>676</sup>

According to Nancy Chodorow, this type of situation can be inscribed in the process of disruption of the pre-oedipal bond: «disruption in mother-child empathy that occurs when mothers who had originally formed (or seem to have formed) an appropriate unity with their infant were then unable to give it up. [...] The mothers lacked real empathy but had pseudo-empathy which kept the daughters from forming their own identity, either through identifying and feeling like someone or through contrasting themselves to someone»<sup>677</sup>. In Sarraute's narrative, the mother's words are sometimes dangerous and threatening, sometimes violent, even murderous, they have the singular capacity to forge and sever the social and natural relations between all things. But, above all, «without the victim's even daring to admit it frankly to himself, they often are the daily, insidious and very effective weapon responsible for countless minor crimes»<sup>678</sup>. The maternal figure teaches Natacha that nothing is unconditional, except as language makes it so. As Bella Brodzki notes:

It could be argued that what she lacks is the referent that would ground her life's shifting and unstable signifiers: the maternal body/voice. But the kind of extreme linguistic disruption Sarraute represents here is an effect not of the way language mediates presence-in-absence but of the way language also mediates absence-in-plenitude: mother lack, Sarraute more than suggests, governs Natasha's

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>676</sup> Nathalie Sarraute, op. cit., p. 87.

<sup>677</sup> Nancy Chodorow, op. cit., p. 101.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>678</sup> Nathalie Sarraute, *Age of Suspicion*, op. cit., p. 97.

phenomenological relationship to language through the various expressions of arbitrary maternal authority and affection (the embodiment of both Law and Love) that subvert the very ideal of body/voice itself. This Mama is the kind of elusive mother-object of desire who most witholds when she is physically present<sup>679</sup>

It is well known to what extent the world of language, with its mutilating power and force, has always been a concern for Sarraute. In *Enfance*, «le mot est dès l'origine, pour Nathalie Sarraute, l'enjeu d'un combat où l'enfant reconnaît sa différence d'avec le monde des autres» <sup>680</sup>. And the first 'other' is the mother; in one way or another, all the events recounted in *Enfance* have to do with this crucial issue. Whether it is the first chapters of revolt against the absence of the mother, whether it is those in which a few words alone are enough for Natacha to feel "superfluous" in relation to her mother, or the scenes of night-time fear, everything suggests and reminds us of the initial trauma, i.e., the rejection by the mother <sup>681</sup>. However, it is precisely in these experiences, in the first tropisms and the development of "suspicion" – all inspired by the rigidity of the mother's

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>679</sup> Bella Brodzki, art. cit., p. 251.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>680</sup> [For Nathalie Sarraute, the word is from the outset the issue of a struggle in which the child recognises its difference from the world of others] Amaud Rykner, *Nathalie Sarraute*, Seuil, Paris, 1991, p. 32.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>681</sup> As Sarraute states: «J'ai voulu décrire comment naît la souffrance qui accompagne le sentiment du sacrilège. Quel sacrilège? Celui qui a consisté pour l'enfant à nier le mensonge originel, à mettre en question la beauté originelle, la suavité, la sublimité, la beauté maternelle qu'elle avait pourtant jusque-là reconnue, absorbée avec volupté. Un sacrilège qui a peut-être déclenché la vie d'un écrivain» [I wanted to describe how the suffering that accompanies the feeling of sacrilège arises. What sacrilège? The one that consisted for the child in denying the original lie, in questioning the original beauty, the suavity, the sublimity, the maternal beauty that she had so far recognised, absorbed with voluptuousness. A sacrilège that may have triggered the life of a writer] Viviane Forrester, « Portrait de Nathalie », *Le Magazine littéraire*, n. 196, 1983, p. 18-21, p. 19.

tone and language – in which the future writer can be recognised, the rejection of any stereotypical language expression.

Enfance traces a path of progressive liberation from the maternal domain and its normative language that favours the "grands mots"; what Yvette Went-Daoust defines, taking up Bakhtine's categories, as an "authoritarian word" that frequently resorts to the abstract form of the axiom or the sentence<sup>682</sup>. Just as we had seen happen in the case of Elias Canetti, in Sarraute's example the revolt against the symbolic order – against the normative power of language – starts from language itself. It takes shape in the search for tropisms, in the deconstruction of the word in the acoustics of sub-conversation. Enfance, closes with a kind of "expulsion from paradise" 683, i. e., the "cutting of the umbilical cord", the renunciation, once and for all, of the pre-oedipal fantasy:

I twill be painful for me to be the one to sever the bond that still attaches me to my mother, it is no longer very

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>682</sup> According to Bertrand-Jennings' reading, starting with the refuse of any conventional language use, the author's struggle with rejection (starting from her mother's rejection) leads the writer in turn to seek to reject categories such as «enfant/adulte, femme/home, juive/aryenne, russe/française, fille du père/de la mère» So that no category remains to which rejection may be attached, Sarraute, according to Bertrand-Jennings, instead promotes the neutral in the characters of her text and in herself: «Pour désamorcer l'antinomie conflictuelle, il faut abolir toute spécificité, atteindre au fond commun de l'humanité, représenté par ce que l'auteur nomme le neutre. C'est ce à quoi s'emploie la totalité de l'œuvre sarrautienne dans son refus obstiné de reconnaître une quelque difference entre les êtres» [To defuse the conflictual antinomy, it is necessary to abolish all specificity, to reach the common ground of humanity, represented by what the author calls the neutral. This is what the whole of Sarrautian's work is about in its obstinate refusal to recognise any difference between beings] Chantal Bertrand-Jennings, «Nathalie Sarraute: Genèse d'une écriture» The French Review, vol. 83, n. 1, 2009, pp. 78-89, p. 85.

 $<sup>^{683}</sup>$  I'm here referring to the last chapter of Canetti's  $\it Die\ gerettete\ Zunge,$  entitled "Paradise Rejected".

strong, but at certain moments I feel it, it starts tugging at me... a pain like those latent ones that are revived by the surrounding atmosphere, cold, humidity...<sup>684</sup>

Compared to what we have described so far, in analysing the maternal figure presented by Ginzburg we see a real change of direction. Natalia's mother shows from the very beginning «an optimistic nature»<sup>685</sup>. Lidia is an imaginative woman, whose childhood memories include some exciting theatre experiences, and who occupies spaces and moments in her daily life by humming opera and operetta pieces, ditties, and dirges; she loves reading and chrishes friendship:

She had a cheerful nature and no matter where she went she found people to love and who loved her, and whenever she was she managed to take pleasure in the things that surrounded her and to be happy [...] She was happy nevertheless, for as soon as she left off cruing she would become very cheerful and sing around the house at the top of her voice: *Lohengrin, The Slipper in the Snow* and *Don Carlos Tadrid*<sup>686</sup>

From the very beginning she shows a positive vocalic relationality. The mother's education is in fact predominantly musical and theatrical, immediately characterised by vocal dominance: «She had recited, sung and danced in school entertainments, she had acted in a play dressed up as a monkey and she had sung in an operetta called *The Slipper in the Snow*. She had written an opera and set it into music. [...] And she had written a poem

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>684</sup> Nathalie Sarraute, op. cit., p. 155.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>685</sup> Natalia Ginzburg, *The things we used to say*, op. cit., p. 84.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>686</sup> Ibid., pp. 23-24.

[...] and she also parodied Metastasio»<sup>687</sup>. Singing naturally occupies spaces and moments of everyday life, along with the phrases she likes to repeat:

'I am Don Carlos Tadrid / And I'm a student in Madrid,' my mother would sing at the top of her voice while she got up and while she was brushing her hair, still sopping wa because she too, like my father, used to take a cold shower. They had some prickly gloves with which they used to rub themselves after the shower to warm themselves up. 'I'm freezing!' my mother would say, but with delight because she loved cold water. 'I'm still quite frozen! How cold it is!' And with her bathrobe hugged around her and a cup of coffee in her hand she would go for a turn round the garden. My sister and brothers were all at school and at that hour there was a little peace in the house. My mother would sing and shake out her wet hair in the morning breeze. Then she would go into the ironing-room to chat with Natalina and Rina<sup>688</sup>

Her musical passion is not just a youthful infatuation since, after five children, she wants to start studying piano, with that somewhat free-spirited spontaneity that, at least superficially, characterises her: «She had piano lessons from a tutor who had been recommended to her by a certain Signora Donati, who had also started learning the piano in middle-age»<sup>689</sup>. In addition to her musical and theatrical education, her curiosity is also mirrored in her interest in reading, which can be traced – in the range of textual situations that concern her – to an activity of leisure or rest, filling the empty spaces of everyday life: «She liked to read the newspaper after

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>687</sup> Ibid., p. 16.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>688</sup> Ibid., p. 32.

<sup>689</sup> Ibid., p. 86.

lunch and to doze indoors on the sofa»<sup>690</sup>. The emerging portrait is that of a naive and sentimental reader, who participates in the characters' dramas with empathy, repeating certain passages as if they were nursery rhymes; a woman-child who follows an emotional logic in literature as well as in life. Thus, in her words, Proust becomes «someone who really loved his mamma and his grandmother and that he had asthma and could never sleep, and that because he couldn't bear noise he had lined the walls of his room with cork»<sup>691</sup>. According to how she is described, a mechanism of identification is activated in her mind, dictated by an affectivity that is reflected in the events of fictional characters; the distant worlds of literature are evoked as behavioural examples, humanised in the same way as her acquaintances. In the mother's mind, the difference between reality and fiction is blurred, literature and life often overlap: «"La petite phrase," my mother used to say. "It's so lovely when he talks about *la petite phrase*" »<sup>692</sup>, Lidia repeats several times recalling the Recherche, emphasising a mental mechanism that relies not on the textuality of the source, but rather on an oral and mnemonic diction. Her narrative skill is precisely in the charm of evocation, which she achieves through a thickening process that transforms any past event into present-day storytelling marked by a gentle affabulatory activity. The joyfully ditzy mother personality reveals her deepest traits during the difficult years of fascism and the Nazi occupation in Italy.

As for my mother, she had an optimistic nature and lived in hope of some dramatic and favourable turn of events. She looked forward to the day when someone would succeed in "booting out" Mussolini. My mother would go out in the morning saying, "I'm off to see if fascism is still on its feet.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>690</sup> Ibid., p. 4.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>691</sup> Ibid., p. 51.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>692</sup> Ibid., p. 58.

I'm off to see if they've booted out Mussolini yet." She would pick up hints and rumours in the shops and read comforting omens into them. At lunch she would tell my father, "There's a lot of discontent at the moment. People aren't going to stand for much more." "Who told you that?" my father would yell, and my mother would reply, "My greengrocer." My father would snort with contempt<sup>693</sup>

The unshakeable joy of recounting an endless stream of anecdotes and rhymes actually conceals a profound potential, i.e., that of that of keeping the family together. The maternal attitude is a form of resitence capable of leaving history's influence on the doorstep. Despite the hurried pace of events caused by the war, Natalia Ginzburg's mother's naive attitude reappears near the end of the novel, with a circularity that highlights in the mother's sensitivity a psychological condition and taste that are always immobile and the same. Here the mother reappears as a grandmother, with the same role she had for her children: the role of cheerful storyteller able to weave, with light-hearted ease, and with frequent recourse to music and poetry, the web linking the present to the past.

"Capi! Monsieur Vitali! Fine Wrappings are Deceitful. Honour your Father and Mother. Fine Wrappings Reveal the Truth." And she would go on to enumerate all the characters and chapter headings in *Nobody's Boy*, which she knew off by heart from having read the book so many times to her own children and from reading it now to mine, a chapter every evening, always falling under the spell of those

tales which, although they might take a dramatic turn for the worse at times, always had a happy ending<sup>694</sup>

Ginzburg repeatedly emphasises the functioning of her mother's memory: «Many of her memories were like this, a single phrase that she had overheard»<sup>695</sup>. The mother's sayings are random, short sentences she recalls from people met in her life. Here an example of a sentence she heard when she was little:

One day she was little, walking along a street in Milan, she had seen a man standing stock still in front of a hairdresser's window, staring at the head of a shop dummy and saying to himself, "Bonny, bonny, bonny. Bit too long in the neck."

Ginzburg notes that her mother's ordinary speech is constantly colored by reproductions of phrases she heard from strangers, family, or friends. These phrases then become family sayings, known and shared by everyone. Ginzburg's mother appears to live wrapped in the presence of these comforting familiar voices, songs and sayings, as maps and points of references guiding her world.

Natalia's mother, in a fragmentary and anecdotal style, transmits family history and the pleasure of oral transmission to the narrator. All the figures inhabiting her mother's mind become part of the child imagination too: the influence of the stories told by her mother gives Natalia the effect of a phantasmagoria in which their memories intertwine.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>694</sup> Ibid., p. 199.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>695</sup> Ibid., p. 15.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>696</sup> Ibid.

Turati and Madame Kuliscioff always came into my mother's reminiscences and I knew that they were both still alive and that they lived in Milan [...] and that they were involved in politics and in the struggle against fascism. However they got jumbled up in my imagination with other figures who also came into my mother's reminiscences: her parents, Silvio, the Daftie, the Walrus. People who were either dead or, at any rate, must be extremely old even if they were still alive, because they had taken part in the distant events of those far off days when my mother was young and had heard the words, "It's my doggie's little sister" and "What does hydrogen sulphide stink like?" People you could not meet or touch any longer, and even if you could they would not be the same as they were in my head, and who even if they were still alive had nevertheless been contaminated by the proximity of the dead with whom they lived in my imagination. They eluded the grasp with the light, fleeting footsteps of the dead.<sup>697</sup>

In addition to becoming part of the child's confused and dreamy imagination, the mother's tales punctuate the shared moments of everyday family life:

My mother, [...] was cheered up by the pleasure of story-telling itself. Turning to one of us at the meal-table, she would begin to narrate, and whether it was a story about my father's family or about her own she would become animated with joy and it was always as if she were felling that story for the very first time to ears that had never heard it before. "I

had an uncle," she would begin, "who was known as the Walrus." And if the person she was addressing said, "I know this story. I've heard it dozens of times already," she would turn to someone else and quietly go on narrating "How many times have I heard that story!" my father would thunder, catching a phrase or two in passing. My mother would quietly go on narrating<sup>698</sup>

[...]

In our house we used to declaim *Jorio's Daughter*. But above all we used to recite around the table in the evening a poem that my mother knew and had taught to us, which she had heard in her childhood at a charity performance in aid of the survivors of a flood in the Po valley [...] My mother had forgotten how it went on [...] But she made up for the lapses in her memory by the emphasis that she put into the words<sup>699</sup>

Ginzburg's mothers' poems and stories – as it was for Canetti's German language – are never read, but heard, listened to, learnt, conveyed, and re-presented within an oral articulatory framework. However, the mother's enchanted relationship with the word, especially the spoken word, and the fascination it exerts on the woman, is recalled elsewhere in the text: «My mother [...] drank in every word that anyone said to her»<sup>700</sup>.

It is quite straightforward to trace in Natalia Ginzburg's description of her mother some of the traits that characterise herself as a narrator. Ginzburg's childish poetics, a poetics that is «simple, made from next to

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>698</sup> Ibid., pp. 20-21.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>699</sup> Ibid., pp. 24-25

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>700</sup> Ibid., p. 139.

nothing»<sup>701</sup>, is the direct legacy of the maternal stories that first taught her the art of listening, repetition and remembering without which no story would be given. Drawing form Benjamin's theorization of the Storyteller<sup>702</sup>, Giuliana Minghelli describes Natalia Ginzburg as the writer/storyteller who in telling/writing recovers the primordial knowledge/language made of sounds, words and stories heard in childhood, she retrieves a language no longer existent in her time and space and residing solely in her memory as a collective history<sup>703</sup>. This oral language, that becomes Ginzburg's writing, finds its source in her parents' (Minghelli insists that the primary influence is the mother)<sup>704</sup> voices, stories and sayings: «In her recreation of voices she ends up reproducing the world of storytelling whose main voice and transmitter in her lifetime was represented by the mother. Through the repetition of sayings and sketches, Ginzburg presents a work partly oral, partly written, blurring once again, as in the preface of the book, the relationship between author/reader and storyteller/listener»<sup>705</sup>.

One could think that this kind of storytelling is nothing but a form of nostalgia<sup>706</sup>. Although nostalgia is part of remembrance, this interpretation runs the risk of concealing the deeper meaning of Ginzburg's work, namely

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>701</sup> Natalia Ginzburg quoted in Judith Wolf's *Introduction* to Natalia Ginzburg, op. cit., p. xiii.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>702</sup> «takes what [s]he tells from experience [her] own or that reported by others. And [s]he in turn makes it the experience of those who are listening to [her] tale» Walter Benjamin quoted in Minghelli, art. cit., p. 162.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>703</sup> See: Giuliana Minghelli, op. cit., p. 163.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>704</sup> Domenico Scarpa, shares this opinion and states: «Natalia Ginzburg adopte l'esthétique musicale de sa mère pour revendiquer l'éthique intransigeante de son père», Domenico Scarpa, op. cit., p. 17.

<sup>705</sup> Ibid.

 $<sup>^{706}</sup>$  This is Luigi Fontanella's point of view as expressed in his paper, «A reading of *Le voci della sera* and *Lessico Famigliare*», art. cit., p. 37.

what Cantelli calls «the sense of responsibility»<sup>707</sup> of the writer, i.e., to pass on the family history, at the same time as writing herself and her identity. This is the core of Teresa Picarazzi's reading of *Lessico famigliare*, but in my point of view could be seen as the core of Canetti's and Sarraute's otobio-graphies as well, namely a shifting from "I" to an indetermined "We", through which they proclame a plural self in its vitality and correspondence with others.

The narratives (the narrator) assumes the same cathartic function as a psychoanalytic "talking cure" in that they are retrospectively recreating and ordering their family stories, as the narrators construct their own writing *selves*. Through their choice of friendship, lifestyle, career as writer, or intellectual, [...] these daughters are separating from the family while at the same time writing it<sup>708</sup>

According to Minghelli, the writing of Lessico famigliare is Natalia's acknowledgement of her debt to the symbolic order of the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>707</sup> Veruska Cantelli, «The Maternal Lineage: Orality and Language in Natalia Ginzburg's *Family Sayings*», *Journal of International's Women's Studies*, vol. 18, n. 1, 2017, pp. 180-197, p. 188.

Teresa Picarazzi, *Maternal Desire: Natalia Ginzburg's Mothers, Daughters and Sisters*, op. cit., p. 96 [emphasis in original]. Both Picarazzi and Cantelli highlight another importat aspect of *Lessico famigliare*, namely its political significance. Published at the end of the sixties, Ginzburg «claims maternal lineage as a transformative experience toward a social, political, and literary restoration at a time when entire student movements are demanding the deconstruction of institutional and family structures [...] Ginzburg proposes the narrative of a woman whose vocation as a writer is organically webbed within that of a mother/ daughter/ writer/ intellectual. Her work, seemingly anachronistic or anti-feminist, is not a nostalgic return to childhood, but a return to the family as an observer who explores the self from the threshold of stories and sayings, who establishes a lineage between the experience of motherhood, writing, and political responsibility; a work that ultimately resonates with the personal and political discourse of Third World Feminism» Veruska Cantelli, art. cit., p. 187.

mother<sup>709</sup>, and, thus, appropriation of her word: «*Lessico famigliare* is the recognition of a debt and constitutes the attempt to absolve it. But absolution perhaps cannot go beyond recognition, which is recognition of the child's desire as desire for the mother: return to her teaching, appropriation of her word»<sup>710</sup>.

While recognising the "maternal imaginary"<sup>711</sup> underlying Ginzburg's narrative, I would attempt a step further, not considering Ginzburg narrative only as an attempt to recover childhood memories and of maternal love, but above all as a practice that brings the self and the other in a simultaneous coexistence within the retelling of the stories. I do share here Cantelli's point of view when she explains that *Lessico famigliare* should be

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>709</sup> I'm here referring to Luisa Muraro's 1992 definition of "symbolic order of the mother", Id., L'ordine simbolico della madre, Editori Riuniti, Roma, 2006. Luisa Muraro's thought fits into the theoretical horizon of "sexual difference thinking". In the wake of Kristeva's and Irigaray's thought, the figure of the mother represents the one who gives life and gives language, that is, she is assumed as the source of material and symbolic existence. As Cavarero explains: «La madre simbolica [...] assurge a principio costitutivo di una relazione fra donne che prevede una disparità e un debito. [...] la relazione madre-figlia trova la sua misura nella naturale verticalità del loro rapporto, riferito allo scambio fra riconoscimento di autorità e facoltà di linguaggio, fra debito e dono. [...] non si tratta di una teoria del soggetto, maschile o femminile, bansì di una teoria della struttura intesa come relazione» [The symbolic mother [...] assumes the constitutive principle of a relationship between women that involves inequality and debt. [...] the motherdaughter relationship finds its measure in the natural verticality of their relationship, referring to the exchange between recognition of authority and faculty of language, between debt and gift. [...] this is not a theory of the subject, male or female, but rather a theory of the structure understood as a relationship] Adriana Cavarero, Le filosofie femministe, op. cit., pp. 99-100.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>710</sup> «Lessico famigliare è il riconoscimento di un debito e costituisce il tentativo di assolverlo. Ma l'assoluzione forse non può andare oltre il riconoscimento, che è riconoscimento del desiderio infantile come desiderio della madre: ritorno al suo insegnamento, appropriazione della sua parola» Giuliana Minghelli, art. cit., p. 163.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>711</sup> See Chapter 2, note 148.

read as: «the author's attempt to save, collect, transmit, and report in fact shifts the work into the domain of collective memory and places it right within the genre of autobiography, as the threshold of existing for itself and the other at the same time»<sup>712</sup>.

Among all the interpretations given to Ginzburg's work, Teresa Picarazzi's theories sound particularly interesting. The scholar conducts a reading based on the object-relations theory that poses attention to the lineage of identification between mother and daughter. According to Picarazzi, *Lessico famigliare* is an expression of "maternal desire": the lost relationship between mother and daughter, caused by the universal ideal of man, pervasive in the intellectual and social order, disrupts the pre-oedipal bond between mother and daughter, creating a desire, which in Natalia Ginzburg, is expressed in the form of writing:

The absence (loss, denial, repression) of the primary object of identification (the Great Mother in sexual difference theory, the mother – and then the man or child – in object-relations theory) serve sas the point of departure for the expression of maternal desire. The expression of maternal desire is the articulation of voice, the appropriation of an "I", the act of writing (or of telling one's life story) itself. Maternal discourse thus unfolds as an attempt to recuperate or reason what has been lost, and also to situate that "I" relationally<sup>713</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>712</sup> Veruska Cantelli, art. cit., p. 184.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>713</sup> Teresa Picarazzi, *Maternal Desire: Natalia Ginzburg's Mothers, Daughters and Sisters*, Farleigh Dickinson University Press, Vancouver, 2002, pp. 17-18.

Teresa Picarazzi's quote well summarises the path I tried to draw so far. In the three texts analysed, within a horizon of signification that privileges the relationship between mother and children, the mother figure represents the one who gives life and gives language, i.e., she is assumed as the primary and authoritative source of both material and symbolic existence. The classical separation of logocentric philosophical thought, which sees the mother as the source of life and the father as the keeper of the linguistic-symbolic order, is countered by oto-centric thought that shows the coincidence of both in the sole mother figure.

With an inspired narrative based mainly on the acoustic, and thus pre-oedipal, dimension, the three works analysed call into question the assumption of an unmediated presence embodied in/by the mother and an unproblematic relation to the maternal origin. The parental figures, as presented in the three texts, take on a particularly important significance in the aesthetic and poetic research of the three authors. The particular emphasis placed on "maternal imagery" by Canetti, Ginzburg, and Sarraute indicates a desire to go beyond the symbolic order – be it paternal or maternal – to undertake linguistic research based on the acoustic dimension, i.e., a path leading to childhood, to a pre-symbolic unity and to an uncodified language: «a child's body, a "foreign body", different and sensitive – extremely sensitive to everything that touches the skin, everything that is of the Other: different tones, languages of the Other. Each character has a subtle and singular intonation that only the child can hear»<sup>714</sup>.

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>714</sup> «Corps-enfant, "corps étranger", différent et sensible — extrêmement sensible à tout ce qui effleure la peau, tout ce qui est de l'Autre : tons différents, langues de l'autre. Chaque personnage possède une subtile et singulière intonation que seule l'enfant sait entendre» Keling Wei, art.cit., p. 105.

# **Conclusions**

This study aimed at contributing toward the so called "auditory-turn" in the humanities. I do use the term "toward" referring once again to Jean-Luc Nancy's definition of "listening": «to listen is to be straining toward a possible meaning, and consequently one that is not immediately accessible»<sup>715</sup>. The goal that I had set for this work was a challenging one. I sought to bridge the gap between psychoanalytic and philosophical theories and literary texts in order to gain a deeper understanding of whether the three authors under consideration had truly managed, through their unique artistic insights, to grasp the spirit of their time and to portray the crisis of subjectivity and language that they were witnessing. By undertaking this study, I aimed to provide a comprehensive analysis of the works of Elias Canetti, Natalia Ginzburg, and Nathalie Sarraute and to examine the extent to which their writings reflected the historical, cultural, and social context in which they were produced. I intended to explore the ways in which these authors approached the issues of subjectivity and language in their respective works, as well as the literary techniques and strategies that they employed to convey their ideas. Each chapter staged some critical problems relevant to the issue of auditory perception, elaborated upon close reading of the chosen texts. The oto-bio-graphical writing explored in these pages is not meant to show how things should be read and interpreted, but instead places itself as a theoretical nexus around which issues concerning hearing and listening, self and knowledge orbit. Surely – through a predilection for the acoustic sphere (with all that this entails) - Elias Canetti, Natalia

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>715</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, *Listening*, op. cit., p. 6.

Ginzburg and Nathalie Sarraute were able to perceive and anticipate a series of philosophical, literary, and feminist theories that would only take hold in the following decades.

We have seen how various psychoanalytic and philosophical processes participate in the constitution of "self" in their self-narratives. At this point, I argue, can we consider the autobiographical act the ultimate "other"? Can the act of writing – a site of self-construction, of fantasy and meaning – be considered the way through wich recover "the first lost object", i.e., pre-symbolic unity? To answer this question and make it sound less rhetorical, I believe it is necessary to briefly review the path I have taken thus far, summarising the information gathered.

Throughout the twentieth century, auditory perception became a topic of study in a variety of disciplines, particularly philosophy and psychoanalysis. The psychoanalytic and philosophical theories I collected and investigated converge in defining hearing as a fundamental part of the subject's development. Through a shift from autos to oto, the poststructuralist thinking presented in these pages, overcomes the limitations of the split specular subject by re-imagining a theory in terms borrowed from the acoustic domain, with rhythm playing a central role. While, according to the oculocentric tradition, reason implies the separation of subject and object, the acoustic realm involves their union. In auditory perception there is no boundary between perceiver and perceived. That is why, when conducting an analysis of subjectivity based on the acoustic dimension of experience, the main character emerging is the intersubjective nature of the subject. If one puts rhythm as the core element of self-construction, it appears that the subject forms as a sensitive membrane, a tympanum between interiority and exteriority. This theory leads to a decentering and reformulation of the autobiographical subject, suggesting that the rhythmic is a state of being outside of and prior to the social, verbal, thinking subject. It is precisely in the theoretical nexus created between concepts such as "rhythmic" and "preverbal" that autobiographical writing is involved.

The act of writing one's own life story offers a distinct perspective that allows for a nuanced and often complicated portrayal of the subject-self. Autobiographical narratives, through their personal and introspective nature, afford a glimpse into the multifaceted and potentially conflicting dimensions of one's self-concept.

When putting auditory perception at the center of the autobiographical compulsion (Zwang - in Lacoue-Labarthe's sense), the autobiographical seems to be often connected with the desire of capturing an affective tone that lies in the sonority of words (Kristeva's pre-symbolic chora). This, at least, seems to be the center of Canetti's Ginzburg's and Sarraute's poetics, whose interest in the acoustic dimension of writing implicitly suggests the fundamental intersubjective reality of subjectivity itself. On the same note, for the three authors, the sense of hearing is a model for encountering what is seemingly unintelligible, including what is hidden within language. This aspect comes to the fore in their autobiographical works, namely Die gerettete Zunge, Lessico famigliare and Enfance. By highlighting the importance of the voice and of the sonorous envelope of childhood the three autobiographical narratives offer a valuable perspective on the relationship between sound and subjectivity. These texts challenge traditional notions of language and communication, suggesting that the auditory experience can be just as crucial as the linguistic one in shaping our understanding of the world. This emphasis on the pre-verbal apprehension of reality and the role of sound in shaping the self creates a dynamic tension within the texts, as they simultaneously explore the limits of language and celebrate the expressive potential of sound. If we consider "maternal desire" (the loss of the pre-oedipal) as the three authors' true "autobiographical compulsion", we discover the reason of their peculiar self-narrative style. While the narrating "I" is still intersubjectively relational to the Other, the loss of self gives way of self-affirmation, through separateness, through self-representation, through the texts themselves. Since «between identity and narration [...] there is a tenacious relation of desire»<sup>716</sup>, I think we could consider the autobiographical compulsion as the site of the appropriation of the "I", or, at least, as a "desire" for identity. As Cavarero notes, the desire for a unity concerns every human identity; this desire manifests itself in the telling of one's life story, which is nothing more than the urge for an originary sense of wholeness, ultimately for a «desire for narration, in wihch uniqueness and unity coincide once again, after birth»<sup>717</sup>. That said, the post-Lacanian paradox remains: how to achieve, through language, something that exceeds and escapes language? Even though we can't get out of language, access to the pre-symbolic can occur through the sounds within language, a language we first heard before we knew what it meant. As I tried to demonstrate, in the three oto-biographies, the deployment of facts, the historical continuum of one's life, the constitution of a personality, give way to a preponderant concern for language research. In other words, the work on the acoustic materiality of language comes to the fore and structures the meaning. Thus, the three texts constitute an artistic creation rather than a "representation" of reality and life; a poetic elaboration rather than a functional text. The three authors approach childhood, the pre-symbolic period of life when everything is in the process of becoming, in a very unique way. Through the predilection for the acoustic dimension of the experience, the three authors develop a relational identity, i.e., a rhythmic construction of "self" based on the relation with the other. Writing, which is itself a process of becoming, takes up this obscure period of life to explore all of its folds. Rediscovering child's voice means rediscovering words and language for the adult.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>716</sup> Adriana Cavarero, *Relating narratives*. *Storytelling and Selfhood, Routledge*, London and New York, 2000, p. 32.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>717</sup> Ibid., p. 62.

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## On Autobiography

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